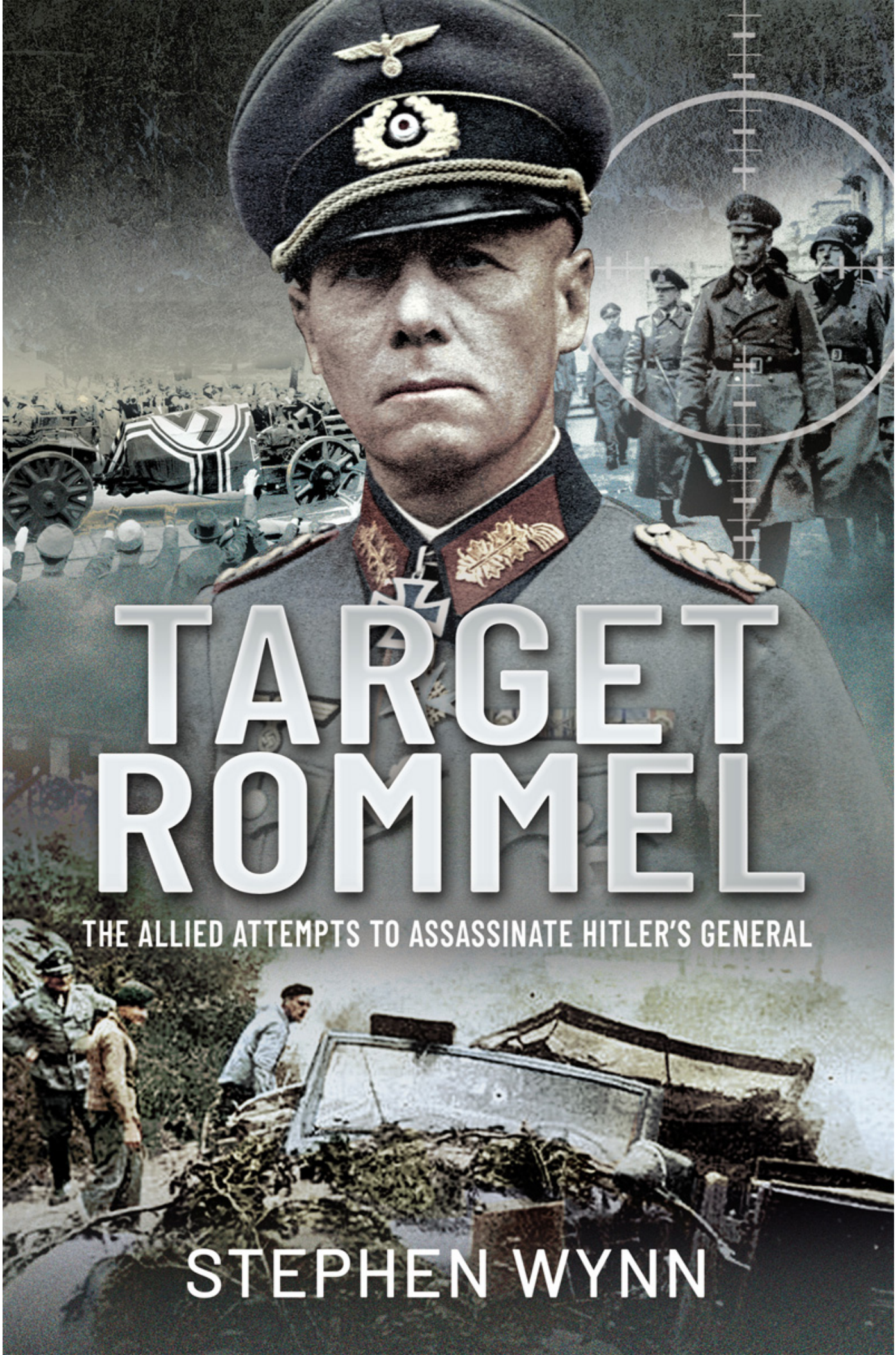
TARGET ROMMEL
THE ALLIED ATTEMPTS TO ASSASSINATE HITLER'S GENERAL
STEPHEN WYNN

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Dedicated to Private Edward George Arthur Madden (2345008), a 3-inch mortar specialist in both the Essex and Royal Suffolk regiments, who was stationed in Cyprus and Germany from 1957-60. Thank you for your service.

Introduction

This book is about British operations that were planned during the Second World War to capture or kill Johannes Erwin Eugen Rommel, better known as Erwin Rommel, although he was so well recorded in the annals of history that, to many, simply the name ‘Rommel’ was sufficient to know to whom it referred.

Separating the myth that surrounds him from the reality of who and what he was, it becomes clear why the Allies, the British in particular, were so determined to capture or kill him that three special operations were planned, although one was turned down by the military authorities.

In many ways Rommel was a complex individual. Born into a reasonably well-to-do family, he was of a class in society where there were expectations of him to make something of his life. His choice on how he would achieve this, from an early age, was a career in the military. On this point, he did not waver; his single mindedness and steely determination to be successful were traits that he never lost.

He served as an officer in the First World War, the same war that saw Adolf Hitler serve as a corporal, but their paths never crossed. Life for a German soldier during the First World War was more straightforward, because there was only the Imperial German Army. There was no SS, no Gestapo, no Nazi Party and no Führer, and it was a totally different war, which for most of the time, on land, was restricted to trench warfare. Aircraft didn’t play a massive part in the war, especially in the early years where they were viewed as more of an observation platform.

During the time between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second World War, Rommel remained in the army, and was an effective and fair leader during times of social and political unrest

throughout Germany where there was a big push to turn the nation into a socialist republic.

Rommel first met Hitler in 1934 in the historic Lower Saxony town of Goslar where he was stationed at the time. It was an important centre both from a civilian perspective and a military one. The Ministry of Food and Agriculture was based there and there were a number of supply companies who made goods for the German war effort, as well as two smaller concentration camps nearby.

The following year Rommel became a military instructor at the Potsdam War Academy, where he spent the next three years, and it was during this time that he wrote and published what became a best-selling book on infantry tactics, entitled *Infanterie greift an*, Infantry Attacks. It was as a result of his growing reputation as a military instructor that he came to the attention of Adolf Hitler, who in 1938 placed him in charge of his Führerbegleitbatallion (FBB) or escort brigade.

All of these different aspects of Rommel's private life and military career assist in the clarification of his true nature. Was he a Nazi, or a loyal German who simply wanted the return of his once great nation? Was he a military genius or an average soldier whose skills, abilities and triumphs were glorified and enhanced by the Nazi Party so that they could reflect in the achievements of a man they saw as one of their own? Regardless of what he was or wasn't, he was seen by the British government and military authorities as a big enough threat to their winning or losing the war, that he warranted kidnapping or assassinating. This was a view which obviously did not change throughout the course of the war as there were two and a half years between each of the two attempts to capture or kill him.

Chapter One

Rommel's Early Life

Johannes Erwin Eugen Rommel was more commonly referred to as the 'Desert Fox' (*Wüstenfuchs*), making him the only enemy general British soldiers had given a nickname to. His military exploits during the Second World War, particularly in North Africa between 12 February 1941 and 9 March 1943, undoubtedly helped to cement his reputation as one of the most charismatic, well-respected and effective senior German officers of the war.

He was born in the picturesque town of Heidenheim, in Baden-Württemberg, Southern Germany, on 15 November 1891, into a loving well-off, middle class family. His father, also Erwin, was a teacher and had in his younger days been a military man, serving as a lieutenant in the German Army. His mother, Helene, was from a reasonably influential family as her father, Karl von Lutz, was a politician who served in the parliament of the state of Württemberg. As a younger man, von Lutz had served in the German Army where he was awarded the Knights Cross, First Class of the Order of the Crown, as well as numerous other awards, which in turn saw him become a member of German nobility. Rommel was one of five children, and the second of four sons born to Erwin and Helene. He was also the only one who chose a career in the military.

In 1899, having made his career choice, he became an ensign, or Fähnrich in the Württemberg Infantry Regiment No. 124, and was stationed at Weingarten, where he remained for eleven years until he went on to officer cadet school in Danzig, today better known as Gdansk, a city on the Baltic coast of northern Poland. He was successful in his military studies and graduated in November 1911, before returning to the 124th Infantry

Regiment in Weingarten, having being commissioned as a lieutenant in January 1912. With the First World War still some thirty months away, a war that nearly everybody knew was coming, Germany's preparations were already well under way.

In 1913, whilst stationed in Weingarten as a military instructor, Rommel began an affair with a local girl, 21-year-old Walburga Stemmer. He was struck by her natural beauty and she was taken by his dashing appearance and handsome good looks. It was a relationship of emotional feelings and not just lust but which, within a year, resulted in the birth of an illegitimate daughter, Gertrude Stemmer, who was born on 8 December 1913. The surname that appeared on her birth certificate was her mother's rather than Rommel's. There is no record of what his feelings were when he was first told by Walburga that she was pregnant, but rather than being shocked, questioning whether he was the father, or riddled with guilt because he was already engaged to another girl, Rommel announced that he wanted to set up home with Walburga and Gertrude; but the happy family unit never came to fruition.

At the time of Rommel's burgeoning relationship with Walburga, he was engaged to Lucie Mollin, who was away studying at the University in Danzig. Separation and loneliness do not make for a good combination, because although in such circumstances the heart might well grow fonder, it also throws people into contact with each other who might otherwise never have met. Walburga Stemmer earned her living working as a fruit seller, and in that respect she was as different and as far removed from Lucie as it was possible to be.

Even after Rommel ended his relationship with Walburga and married his fiancée, Lucie, he did not attempt to keep his dalliance with Walburga a secret from his wife. Despite his indiscretion she did not end their relationship. Three years after the birth of his daughter, Rommel and Lucie were married in Danzig in November 1916.

Walburga died on 1 October 1928, when Lucie, who by then had married Rommel, became pregnant with their son, Manfred. Officially Walburga died of pneumonia, although it is widely believed that she committed suicide by taking an overdose of medication, something confirmed by

Gertrud's son, Josef Pan, who claimed that the family doctor had told his mother that Walburga did in fact take her own life.

What appears apparent is that Walburga lived in hope that one day she and Rommel would become an item, that he would divorce Lucie and marry her, and along with their daughter, Gertrude, they could become a proper family. Rommel and Lucie had been married for twelve years before Manfred was born, and he was their only child. Once Lucie became pregnant with Manfred, Walburga finally gave up any hope of Rommel ever leaving his wife and setting up home with her. The realisation she had lost the man she loved was simply too much for her to cope with and she took her own life.

As for Rommel, he told Lucie not only about his relationship with Walburga, but of the birth of their daughter, Getrude. Lucie was supportive of his relationship with his daughter and the fact that they maintained a close relationship; neither did she make any complaint with Rommel's desire to support his daughter financially.

For Rommel, the birth of his son Manfred came at a difficult time, as just two months earlier Walburga had died aged just 36. Gertrude was a frequent visitor to Rommel's home, and even after his death she was still considered to be part of the family and was not ostracised by Lucie. As far as visitors were concerned, Gertrude was referred to as 'Cousin Gertrude'.

Gertrude had knitted her father a scarf which he wore regularly throughout the Second World War and was often photographed wearing. They appear to have had an excellent father/daughter relationship, and would write to each other regularly when he was away during the war, such was the closeness of their relationship.

In her adult life Gertrude married Josef Pan, who earned his living as a grocer selling fruit and vegetables. They had three children Josef, Helga and Anton. Theirs was a marriage which Rommel greatly approved of, as any father would knowing that his daughter was happy and would be looked after by a man who loved her. It must have been rather daunting for her husband, Josef, knowing that his father-in-law was an officer in the German Army, even if he wasn't as famous at the time of their wedding as he eventually went on to be.

Gertrude passed away in 2000, at the age of 86. She had kept all the letters she had received from her father, along with the more than 150 letters Rommel sent to her mother, which on her death were passed on to her eldest son Josef.

Rommel's change of heart about setting up home with Walburga and Gertrude could have been because his parents and other family members had applied pressure on him and reminded him of his responsibilities to his fiancée, Lucie. Possibly they reminded him of how it would look socially if he backed out of marrying the woman he had promised to marry. It could have been that the German military authorities intervened and felt that Lucie Mollin was better suited than Walburga to being the wife of a high ranking and well thought of German officer.

In March 1914, just four months before the outbreak of war, Rommel was posted to the 4th Battery, 49th Field Artillery Regiment, XIII (Royal Württemberg) Army Corps of the Imperial German Army, as a battery commander, but with the outbreak of the war he returned to the 124th Infantry Regiment at Wiengarten.

In 1937, Rommel's book on infantry tactics, *Infanterie greift an*, was about his personal experiences during the First World War, which saw him serve as an infantry officer in Austria, Belgium, France, Italy and Rumania, providing him with a unique perspective on the war. The book describes in detail his involvement in a number of battles and conflicts during the war.

The First World War is where he learned the importance of being a good leader of men, who, if led in the correct way would not only be an effective fighting force, but would be loyal and willingly endure whatever hardship was placed upon them. This was ultimately what helped make Rommel the feared and respected general that he went on to be during the Second World War.

In the first chapter he begins by describing how on the eve of the start of the war, he was serving with the 4th Battery, 49th Field Artillery Regiment, at Ulm, but soon after managed to acquire a transfer to the 7th Company, 124th Infantry (6th Württemberg) Regiment, stationed at Weingarten. Once he had obtained his transfer, he packed his belongings and along with a Private Hanle, immediately travelled to his new posting at Weingarten.

Matters were fast moving at the time. Because of the number of international alliances in existence, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 quickly escalated from a localised issue in the Balkans to one which involved most of the great powers of Europe. After Russia mobilised her troops, putting them on an all-out war footing, and then refused to demobilise in response to a German demand to do so, Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August to support Austria-Hungary, with whom she had a long standing alliance. On 3 August Germany declared war on Belgium after she refused permission for German troops to travel through the country to get to France on which Germany had also declared war on the same day.

Despite declarations of war flying about all over the place and all of this apparent confusion there was an air of calmness throughout Germany. Rommel, who by now had met up with the men of the 7th Company, 124th Infantry (6th Württemberg) Regiment, described the smiling faces of enthusiastic young soldiers waiting to march off to war. The first men of his regiment left to the accompanying sound of a brass band, before catching a train to Ravensburg. Later Rommel was to describe his frustration at not being part of the first group of his men to leave. Instead he had to remain behind and travel with the reserve element of his regiment, who did not leave until 5 August.

The young men whom Rommel described obviously had no idea of what they would shortly encounter. Their enthusiastic ignorance allowed them the opportunity to enjoy the moment they were wrapped up in. The scenic views of the German countryside, and the smiling faces and cheers they were met with as they passed through each town en route to the front, would soon be replaced by darkness, death, explosions and faces distorted with pain and suffering. They would soon find out that there was no glory in war, just death and despair. Many of them would never get to smile again.

It wasn’t long before Rommel, a platoon commander at this time, and his men were in the thick of the action. It was in August 1914, less than a month after the war had begun that they found themselves fighting against the French at Verdun in a time before trench warfare.

On 29 January 1915, Rommel was leading his men in a raid on a number of French controlled block-houses in the Argonne region of France. It was without question a daring raid, one which the French defenders would not have expected. The position in question was protected and surrounded by masses of barbed-wire, but this did not deter Rommel, who along with a few of his men had made their way through the French defences only to discover that the rest of the platoon had not followed, despite his repeated orders for them to do so. Angered by this display of open disobedience, Rommel crawled back through the wire and threatened to shoot the first man if the rest of them did not follow him back through the wire.

Realising that Rommel was more than intent on carrying out his threat if they failed to comply with his 'request', they hurriedly followed him through the wire to take part in the attack. Once the company was complete and in position, Rommel and his men began their attack on the four houses. Things went their way and after a relatively short engagement, the four French block houses were captured, the difficult part of the operation was always going to be holding on to them, and so it proved to be. Once the French had recovered from the initial shock and surprise of the audacious German attack on their position, they regrouped and counter attacked, which was successfully repelled. But the undeterred French, who were in possession of a steely determination, attacked for a second time, and such was the ferocity of their attack, Rommel and his men were forced to retreat back through the barbed wire, to the relative safety of their own lines.

For his actions that day, Rommel was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class, making him the first officer of his regiment to receive such an award. This somewhat unorthodox and unexpected manner of fighting was the beginning of what, during the Second World War, would become Rommel's normal style of attrition and elevate his military reputation to such a level that the British deemed it necessary to try and assassinate him.

In September 1915 Rommel was promoted to the rank of 1st Lieutenant and at the same time, transferred to the newly formed Alpenkorps where he became a company commander in the Royal Württemberg Mountain Battalion. The reason why the Imperial German Army had decided to form its own mountain units was born out of the difficulties they had encountered

in fighting the elite French mountain infantry force, *Chasseurs Alpins*, in the Vosges Mountains of Eastern France during the Battle of the Frontiers. This was a number of battles that took place between 7 August and 6 September 1914, stretching from the southern Belgian border, all the way down the eastern side of France.

Rommel and his men also saw action during the Second Battle of Jiu Valley, in November 1916, which was fought against Romanian forces and resulted in a resounding German victory.

Rommel continued to see his fair share of action during the First World War. In August 1917, he was involved in the fighting at the Battle of Mount Cosna, which saw a combined German and Austro-Hungarian force take on and eventually defeat a Romanian and Russian force. Perhaps one of his more outstanding feats of the war was his victory at the Battle of Caporetto in Italy, which lasted for more than three weeks between 24 October and 19 November 1917. During the battle, he and his men who numbered just 150, captured some 9,000 Italian prisoners and more than 80 artillery pieces. It was an achievement gained by somewhat unorthodox military tactics, which were so fast-paced and multi-directional, that the Italians surrendered. Rommel repeated similar tactics during the Battle of Longarone on 9 November 1917. This time an entire division of Italian soldiers, believing they were up against a much bigger force than they actually were, surrendered. For this and his actions during the Battle of Caporetto, Rommel was awarded the Pour le Mérite. The criteria for its award included having to have captured, or successfully defended a fortification, or victory in battle, and was for officers only.

The Battle of Longarone was to be Rommel's last action of the First World War, because early the following year he was promoted to the rank of captain and transferred to a 'desk job' with the 64th Army Corps, who were serving on the Western Front at the time of the war's end.

Rommel had learned a great deal from his First World War experiences, including that to defeat the enemy, no matter what tactics he deployed, and no matter what the enemy's strengths were, he had to have the respect and trust of his men. If he had those two elements on his side, he knew in battle it was possible to achieve almost anything.

Rommel was one of a number of officers who remained in the German Army after their defeat in the First World War. By the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, an extremely large and some would say, ‘long winded’ document which consisted of 440 Articles and a number of Annexes, allowed Germany to keep an Army of no larger than 100,000 men.

In 1920, Rommel was still serving with his war time unit, the 124th Infantry Regiment, which was part of the XIII (Royal Württemberg) Army Corps, at a time when many of Germany’s major cities were experiencing repeated occasions of civil unrest. Rather than using force he went with diplomacy. In place of bullets and guns he used empathy, understanding and negotiation, because he wanted to encourage an atmosphere of ‘us’ rather than ‘us and them’. His tactics worked, because he understood the underlying problems of what everyday German people were experiencing.

Rommel was a nationalist who wanted Germany to return to being the great and powerful nation she had once been, and its people to be a united force rather than a disjointed and divided nation. He had experienced at first hand the solidarity of which Germans were capable during his time in the trenches on the Western Front during the bloody and brutal fighting of the First World War.

There is definitely a discussion to be had concerning Rommel and where he sat with the Nazi Party and their stance on the Jewish situation. Rommel was a German and was first and foremost loyal to his country. As he saw it, and by way of example, a German Jew saw his first loyalty being to the Jewish faith and not to the German nation. That type of loyalty was alien to his comprehension. It is not this author’s opinion that he supported Germany’s Nazi doctrine on Jewish people and the drive to deliver their mass extermination.

The issue is compounded somewhat by Rommel’s view of Hitler. It wasn’t quite one of ‘hero worship’ but it wasn’t that far removed. He saw him as some kind of ‘messiah’, a man whose destiny it was to restore Germany to the level of greatness and power she had once possessed on the world stage. But sadly, this left Rommel with a somewhat blinkered view of Adolf Hitler, especially in the early years of the Nazi Party.

The *Führerbegleitbatallion* was Hitler's personal escort battalion, which looked after his safety whenever he travelled outside Germany on foreign trips. In October 1938, having been impressed with Rommel's all-round abilities, Hitler placed him in charge of his personal security detail. This was a position that nobody would have been foolhardy enough to turn down.

Rommel's only son, Manfred, who was born in Stuttgart in 1928, also saw military service during the Second World War, when he became a Luftwaffenhelfer, or air force assistant as part of an anti-aircraft battery in 1943, when he was just 14 years of age. Two years later, in March 1945, when he had turned 16 he became a member of the *Reichsarbeitsdienst*, or the Reich Labour Service, Germany's official state labour service, whose job it was to militarise the workforce and to ensure they continued to follow Nazi ideology, an approach which continued right up to the end of the war.

As a member of the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* he was stationed at Riedlingen, a town in Baden-Württemberg, in south-west Germany. At the war's end he was captured and became a prisoner of war. When the significance of his identity was discovered, he was interrogated by members of the French Army. It was at this time when the actual circumstances of his father's death first came to light. All that had been known of Rommel's death by the Allies up until that point, was that he had died of his wounds sustained when his staff car had been strafed by enemy aircraft whilst driving in Normandy.

After the war Manfred Rommel became a student at the University of Tubingen where he studied law, passed his exams and went on to become a practising lawyer. By the late 1950s he had become a politician, and in 1974, he became the Mayor of Stuttgart, a position he held until 1996.

An interesting fact about Manfred Rommel was his friendships with both George Patten IV, a general in the United States Army, son of General George S. Patton, and David Montgomery, the 2nd Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, the son of Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery. Both Patten and Montgomery had been adversaries of his father during the Second World War.

Chapter Two

Operation Flipper – November 1941

It would be fair to say that despite Rommel being the enemy of the British, as far as the officers and men of the British Eighth Army were concerned, he was somebody they respected. The reason why this view was so widespread, isn't clear, as many of those who held that opinion had never been involved in any of the fighting against him and his troops.

The level of respect held for Rommel by members of the British Army, and Winston Churchill's government, was such that he was seen as a real threat to an Allied victory during the Second World War. It was felt by the British that if Rommel could be assassinated, Germany would not only lose a competent general, but that the morale of large swathes of the German armed forces would be negatively affected along with that of the general population.

General Sir Alan Cunningham

General Sir Alan Cunningham was appointed as the Commander of the newly formed Eighth Army in August 1941. In this position he was tasked with leading and directing the Libyan Desert Offensive, part of which included Operation Crusader, a British-led Allied attack by the Eighth Army, along with Commonwealth forces and those from India and other allied nations. It was a surprise attack which began on 18 November 1941, and was intended to bypass Axis forces who were defending the Egyptian/Libyan border, and liberate Tobruk which had been under German siege for several months. It initially caught the Germans totally off guard, with the ultimate intention of defeating the armoured forces of both Germany and Italy before pushing on to relieve the Siege of Tobruk. The

final outcome of the operation was the liberation of Tobruk by New Zealand forces on 27 November 1941.

Unbeknown to Cunningham at the time, he had beaten Rommel ‘to the draw’, as he had been planning his own offensive against Tobruk which was due to commence on 23 November. Cunningham was also the man who initially came up with the idea of killing Rommel, such was his status as a more than effective enemy. Cunningham believed that if they could eliminate Rommel, confusion would reign amongst the rest of the Afrika Korps, which would ultimately result in the Allies winning the fight in North Africa. The assassination plot was timed to take place immediately before the beginning of Operation Crusader, which if successful would then make the latter operation a whole lot easier.

An operation was devised and the man chosen to lead the raiding party was Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Charles Tasker Keyes, son of the British First World War hero, Admiral of the Fleet Roger John Brownlow Keyes, 1st Baron Keyes. It would be more accurate to say that Keyes, who played a large part in the planning of the operation, selected himself to lead the raiding party.

Roger Keyes, at the personal request of Prime Minister Winston Churchill, had become the first Director of Combined Operations in June 1940. He had earned his reputation as a man who got things done during the Boxer Rebellion in China between 1899 and 1901, and in the First World War he had been in charge of the Dover Patrol, which helped guard the English Channel from vessels of the German navy. He also planned and led the famous and successful raid on the German submarine pens at Zeebrugge, which was very similar to the raid at St Nazaire during the Second World War.

In his new role he came up with the idea of training commandos and organising raids on the coastline of hostile or occupied nations. Some of his ideas on how these commandos could be used were considered by the Chiefs of Staff to be impractical and such was their negative response that Keyes effectively found himself sacked from his position in October 1941. How ironic it was that less than a month later, his son, Geoffrey Keyes,

would not only be killed in action whilst taking part in such a raid, but would be posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

It had been the well-respected Geoffrey Keyes who, at only 24 years of age, and the youngest person in the history of the British Army to have reached the rank of lieutenant colonel, was given the unenviable task of planning the operation to capture or kill Erwin Rommel. The main part of the plan called for commandos to attack the Afrika Korps forces, and the buildings that were believed to be Rommel's headquarters and his personal accommodation on the outskirts of the Libyan village of Beda Littoria. The raid was never going to be easy even with a full complement of men, but as eighteen of the raiding party did not even make it off the submarine which had brought them from Alexandria, it was going to be an almost impossible task.

The common sense approach may well have been to have aborted the operation once the eighteen commandos did not make it ashore, but Keyes decided to continue with the mission. Even allowing for the fact that once the raiding party, greatly reduced in numbers as they were, had made it ashore they were limited in what they could do. They could have remained close to their original landing position, called the submarines to come and pick them up earlier than had been arranged, delay the operation and all live to fight another day.

Looking at Keyes' decision to continue with the raid, all these years later, it does not seem to make any sense whatsoever to have done so. He must have known that if they had actually found Rommel's headquarters and personnel accommodation, the area would have had an extremely high degree of security in place, which meant that their chances of completing a successful mission were minimal at best. There is no question that Keyes was a brave, heroic and competent young officer, which makes his decision to continue with the operation and lead the raiding party even more difficult to understand. Senior British Army officer Lieutenant Colonel Sir Robert Laycock had tried unsuccessfully to dissuade Keyes from both going ahead with the operation and leading the raiding party, but Keyes would not, for whatever reason, listen to him on either point.

Operation Flipper was planned during October and early November 1941 at the Eighth Army headquarters in Cairo, Egypt. The men chosen to carry it out were from No. 3 Troop, previously the 11th (Scottish) Commando. The Commandos had only been formed in June 1940 and consisted of volunteers from existing Scottish regiments. To become a Commando a recruit had to attend and pass a six week intensive course in the Scottish Highlands which focused on a combination of fitness, training and familiarisation in the use of different weapons, map reading, rock climbing, boat operations and demolitions.

Even before Operation Flipper had begun, the men of No. 11 Commando knew that despite having only been in existence for eighteen months, it was only a matter of time before their unit was disbanded, which was a fate that had already befallen their comrades from No. 7 and No. 8 Commandos. The main reason for this decision was due to there being an insufficient number of trained men to effectively sustain these specialist units. In an earlier operation at the Battle of the Litani River in Lebanon on 9 June 1941, No. 11 Commando had suffered heavy losses, and because of the specialist role which they carried out, it was not possible to just send out reinforcements without any notice. To be able to achieve that took months of advanced planning, which meant there had to be a sufficient number of men ready and willing to volunteer for such work, and of those volunteers, not all would be up to the standard required. The other aspect to be considered is that with an ever increasing need for men in all branches of the military there were those commanding officers and other senior military personnel, as well as politicians, who believed commandos were nothing more than an unnecessary luxury.

Operation Flipper was a rather strange affair, because it supposedly had not one, but four aims. It has always been described as one of the two official war time kidnap attempts of Rommel by the Allies. That being the case, why complicate the plan any further by adding additional targets to the operation, as if kidnapping or killing Rommel wasn’t going to be a difficult enough task?

The other three aims of the operation were to destroy a wireless station and intelligence centre at Apollonia, an Italian communications mast at the

ancient Greek and Roman city of Cyrene. Apollonia was the birthplace of Hannibal born in 247 BC, the general who commanded Carthage's main forces against the Roman Republic during the Second Punic War, and is widely considered to be one of the greatest military commanders of all time. The third element of the raid was an attack on the headquarters of the Italian Trieste Division near the Libyan town of Slonta.

Although not specified in the orders, the goal of the raid was to kill or capture Rommel, and to disrupt German units before the start of Operation Crusader. The intelligence which determined that the operation to assassinate Rommel should go ahead was weak at best. What had started the whole affair were interceptions of German military radio messages, which had led the British Eastern Command Headquarters in Cairo to believe that Rommel's headquarters were to be found at or near to the village of Beda Littoria in northern Libya. But at that stage that is all it was, a belief. Those in charge of the British Eastern Command required some kind of corroboration of Rommel's actual presence, before they were willing to commit valuable resources and equipment to an operation that they already knew would most certainly result in heavy casualties, and some of those taking part in the raid being captured by the Germans to spend the rest of the war as prisoners.

To obtain the confirmation that they required, British Eastern Command turned to the formidable Captain John Haselden, who spoke perfect Arabic and Italian. In the middle of October 1941, he was dropped under the cover of darkness by an RAF aircraft behind enemy lines and, after burying his parachute to prevent his presence in the area being discovered by Italian or German forces, he began his journey on foot towards the village of Beda Littoria, confident enough to wander freely through miles of enemy-held territory.

Fully briefed about what he was looking for, the long-haired Haselden, bearded, tanned and in weathered Arab attire, eventually arrived at the outskirts of the village. He found himself a safe position and through his binoculars began to observe what was going on. It quickly became apparent that although only a village, Beda Littoria was also a hive of military activity. Haselden saw a number of what he quickly identified as Afrika

Korps vehicles parked up in the village, and on more than one occasion he saw German soldiers and officers leaving and arriving. He also noticed the coming and going of a number of what he took to be German despatch riders which, if he was correct, would strongly suggest that what he was looking at was in fact some kind of military headquarters.

It was whilst carrying out his observations that Haselden could have made a mistake. He thought that he had seen Rommel walking out of one of the buildings in the village that were clearly being used for military purposes, get in to a staff car and be driven away. It is quite plausible that Rommel could have visited his old headquarters, but it is similarly believable that it might have been General Schleusener, the chief quartermaster of Panzergruppe Afrika, whose headquarters it actually was, a man who was roughly the same size as Rommel in both height and build. This was not somebody who Haselden had seen close up, but only through his binoculars at a distance of some hundreds of yards, and the man had not been standing still for long, but had walked a short distance from a building to the rear of a car. It is clear that Haselden had only observed the man for no longer than just a few seconds, and as a result an entire operation was put in place because of what could have been an unfortunate yet understandable mistake. His opinion on the identity of the man had no doubt been influenced by reports he had received from local agents who had informed him of sightings of Rommel at Beda Littoria.

It was obvious that regardless of whether or not Haselden had in fact discovered Rommel's headquarters, he had certainly found an important German military location which required so much constant activity. If he could confirm this as being Rommel's headquarters in North Africa, then planning could quickly begin on putting together an operation to kill or capture him.

Once Haselden had seen enough and drawn his own conclusions about what he had discovered at Beda Littoria, he began his two-day journey back across the desert to make his pre-arranged rendezvous point. Here he was met by members of the Long Range Desert Group, who were under the overall command of Lieutenant Colonel David Stirling, the same man who later went on to form the Special Air Service.

A triumphant Haselden couldn't wait to get back to the Eighth Army headquarters in Cairo, so that he could reveal what he believed he had seen at Beda Littoria. With total faith in the information contained in Haselden's report, planning for what had been given the code name Operation Flipper began. It would appear that nobody involved in the planning of the operation knew anything about the location being the headquarters of General Schleusener, the chief quartermaster of Panzergruppe Afrika. If this information had been known, it would have immediately explained why there were so many Afrika Korps vehicles in the village and why so many despatch riders were coming and going.

It was hoped that by undertaking such an operation at Beda Littoria, not only would they be able to capture or kill Rommel, but also cause havoc amongst Germany's Afrika Korps and their Italian allies. With Rommel out of the picture the allies hoped it would be like cutting off 'the head of the snake', and what was left behind would simply just crumble. Someone would have to take over, but who it would be and how long it would take them to take up the position, which was not only in North Africa, but in a fast moving and quick changing environment.

If the British could put in place an operation to eliminate Rommel, and it proved to be successful, it would have gone down in the history of the Second World War as one of the most productive military raids ever, maybe even on par with the commando raid on the dry dock at St Nazaire in March 1943.

When the operation began it was still not one hundred per cent certain that Rommel's headquarters was actually situated at Beda Littoria, and if it was, whether Rommel was definitely there. This was only assumed to be the case because of what Captain John Haselden thought he had seen during his reconnaissance mission. He had also reported that Rommel's staff car had been seen arriving and leaving at a specific building in the area, although how he could have distinguished between one staff car and another is unclear. Sometimes wanting something to be as you imagine becomes such a strong desire that it can become an accepted truth when the reality is totally different. There was no secondary source to confirm that Haselden's report was factually correct. As it turned out his assumption was

partly correct; the building in question had previously been Rommel's headquarters, but this was not the case at the time of Haselden's reconnaissance mission, and certainly not by the time the subsequent raid actually took place.

The other unusual factor to this operation was that it went ahead without there being any confirmation that Rommel was actually at Beda Littoria. Why would he have been there, if it was no longer his headquarters? To even consider deploying forces, especially elite commandos, on such an operation without confirmation that the intended target was there, or that there was a high probability that he was, seems a very strange decision to have made and, it has to be said, the wrong one.

War by its very nature is fluid and circumstances can change very quickly during such times, but there are still some very basic principles one would expect to be followed before committing men and equipment to such an operation. If the operation was to capture or kill Rommel then there was obviously no absolute reason that necessitated capturing him. That being the case, why not send in RAF aircraft and bomb his headquarters to smithereens? With Rommel's supposed 'headquarters' being some 18 miles inland at Beda Littoria, another option would have been to place Royal Naval vessels two miles off shore and open up with their 16- inch guns, whose shells had an effective range of up to 21 miles.

Despite there having been all of these other possible options, the decision was eventually made for the operation to go ahead by using the elite and highly trained British Commandos. Looking at this operation through today's eyes it is hard to believe that it was allowed to proceed. There was no firm intelligence that the location was Rommel's headquarters or that he was actually there. That being the case, why did the operation go ahead?

Using Adolf Hitler as an example, there were at least forty-two known attempts to assassinate him, and at least thirty-one of them took place during the Second World War. With many of the attempts having being planned by German military officers, and not one of them having succeeded, it is unclear why the British believed that they were going to be successful in their attempts at assassinating Rommel.

There is no record, or any other kind of known documentation, which indicates Rommel had any idea the British had earmarked him for assassination. He may not have considered himself an important enough individual to warrant an enemy wanting to assassinate him.

Below is some information of those who were involved in both the planning and implementation of Operation Flipper:

Captain John Edward 'Jock' Haselden

Captain John Edward 'Jock' Haselden was something of a unique character. Born in Ramleh, Egypt, on 10 August 1903, into an affluent family, he was a married man having wed Nadia Ida Marie Szymonski-Lubicz in Alexandria, Egypt on 29 April 1931. They had one son, Gerald, who was born in Egypt on 15 April 1932. Sadly, Nadia was killed in a car crash on 2 March 1936, at Beni Ahmed near Minya in Egypt. With a busy working life, John Haselden was faced with the quandary of what to do with his son. This was a day and age when children were brought up by their mothers whilst fathers were out at work earning the money to feed the family and provide a roof over their heads. It soon got to the stage where Haselden felt that he had no option but to ask his sister, who lived in England, if he could send Gerald to live with her, a request to which she happily agreed.

Before the beginning of the Second World War he had worked as a cotton trader for the United States cotton company, Anderson, Clayton & Company, where he was a partner in the Egypt-based office at El-Minya. Being fluent in Arabic, French and Italian, made him a useful asset for the company. When the Second World War began he wasted no time in telling his bosses in America that he was regrettably handing in his resignation as he wished to enlist in the British Army. With his knowledge of the Middle East region and his mastery of foreign languages, he was allocated to the Intelligence Corps and posted to the Libyan Arab Force. On 13 July 1940 he was transferred to the General Staff of the Middle East office, whose job it was to conduct operations behind enemy lines, with special focus being on the rescuing of Allied prisoners of war who were being held in the region. His area of expertise quickly became that of commando operations. Subsequently he became the Western Desert Liaison Officer at the Eighth

Army Headquarters, gathering intelligence from friendly Arabs, and from where he also worked very closely with members of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG).

He quickly gained their respect for his commitment, ethos and non-stop stream of ideas on how next to be a 'thorn in the enemy's side'. He in return affectionately referred to them as the 'Libyan Taxi Service' as it was to them he turned to whenever he needed dropping off or picking up from one of his 'madcap' missions behind enemy lines. Part of the reason why he was so highly thought of by the men of the LRDG was that nearly every idea he came up with resulted in him having to go behind enemy lines on his own, putting himself in constant danger of being betrayed, killed or captured. Despite these dangers he did not once baulk at the job in hand.

In preparation for Operation Flipper Haselden, along with three other officers and two Arab nationals, were dropped off in the Slonta area of Libya on 10 November 1941 by elements of the LRDG's 'H' Troop, under the command of Captain (58117) Anthony D. Hunter.

Haselden was awarded the Military Cross for his actions when dropped behind enemy lines for nine days in October 1941 on an intelligence gathering mission. He was awarded a bar to his Military Cross for his involvement in Operation Flipper. The citation for the second award read as follows:

Received in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the Middle East. During the period 10th to 20th November 1941, Lieutenant Colonel Haselden was dropped off by the Long Range Desert Group in the area of Slonga, prior to the raid carried out by a detachment of the Middle East Commandos on General Rommel's Headquarters at Sida Rafa.

Wearing a British Battle Dress and Arab headdress, he walked a distance of nearly 100 miles through the heart of the enemy territory in order to make certain reconnaissances prior to the landing of the detachment. After ascertaining the situation regarding enemy and friendly Arab forces in the area he made his way to the selected beach and there awaited the arrival of the British Commandos, which he would then guide in by the use of pre-arranged signals.

Having passed on vital information about the enemy which was immediately transmitted by the Royal Navy to Cairo, and having explained the situation ashore to the raiding party and guided them towards the objective, Lieutenant Colonel Haselden again made his way through miles of enemy territory to his appointed rendezvous with the Long Range Desert Group. On this journey back he succeeded in disrupting vital enemy communications.

Lieutenant-Colonel Haselden's fearless action is worthy of the highest praise. The success he achieved was largely due to information he had gained during his reconnaissance.

The award of a bar to his Military Cross was unusual as it was made on 18 February 1943, some fifteen months after the events for which it was awarded, and five months after he was killed in action during a raid on Tobruk on 14 September 1942.

Even more unusual was his award of being Mentioned in Despatches on 20 June 1946, four years after the events. The citation read: 'Received in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the field. Awarded posthumously.'

Both awards of the Military Cross were for recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the Middle East during 1940 and 1941, and then in 1942 he was killed in action.

An interesting aspect of Operation Flipper was that there were two British lieutenant colonels involved in it on the ground, as part of the raiding party. The man in overall charge of the operation was Robert Laycock, head of commando operations throughout the region, as well as of the Special Boat Service, whilst Geoffrey Keyes chose the most dangerous aspect of the raid for himself. It was unusual for such a highly ranked individual to be involved in the 'raiding' aspect of an operation, and certainly would not happen today.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Laycock

Robert Laycock was in command of what was known as the 'Layforce,' an ad hoc military formation of the British Army that was set up during the

Second World War. The unit consisted of some 2,000 men, split into four 'Special Service' battalions, which had initially been created in February 1941 for service throughout the Middle East, with its main task being to carry out raids on German and Italian communication lines. The men who became the 'Layforce' were drawn from No. 3, 7, 8 (Guards), No. 11 (Scottish), No. 50, and 52 Commandos. Back at their base in Alexandria, the men of the 11th (Scottish) Commando had for some time been practising night landings on local beaches before alighting from surfacing submarines using a combination of rubber dinghies and lightweight canvas canoes known as 'folbots', as they came in the form of a folded boat. The down side of this was that the training which they undertook was in calm, almost still waters, so extracting themselves from a submarine, along with their dinghies and canoes, getting safely into them before rowing ashore, was never a problem. During these practice runs the commandos had honed their skills to such a degree that they had managed to get twenty-five men off the submarines and on to the beach in just one hour.

The conditions they found themselves having to contend with when they did it for real were totally different, hence the reason why two men drowned and a further eighteen never managed to get off the submarine. It is unclear if the weather conditions in the region for early November 1941 had been checked or even considered, although throughout the area the weather was normally quite dry for that time of year.

Robert Laycock was, at the age of 34, some ten years older than Keyes, and a career soldier having been commissioned into the Royal Horse Guards in 1927. By the time of the North Africa campaign he was an experienced soldier, having already seen service during the Battle of France. Before the war was over he would also be involved in special operations in Crete, Sicily and Italy. In relation to Operation Flipper, he had made his views abundantly clear. He had grave concerns about the raid and how effective it would be, but his biggest worry was the evacuation aspect of it. Regardless of how the raid went – and one which he deemed to be 'desperate in the extreme' – he was of the opinion that those taking part in it would either be captured or killed, a view which he had shared with Lieutenant Colonel Keyes, but one which he agreed to keep to himself just

in case his comments had an effect on whether the operation went ahead or not. Despite his concerns over the raid, Laycock decided to take part as an observer.

Research suggests that Keyes wanted this operation to go ahead regardless of what the outcome might have been. When you add to this the fact that he was determined that he should be the one to lead it, it is as if he was desperate not only for the raid to go ahead, but that he saw it as an opportunity to obtain personal glory. Even more concerning is that despite a more experienced officer in the form of Robert Laycock telling him of his worries about the chances of the operation being successful, and repeatedly asking him not to lead the raid, he ignored him and went ahead regardless. It must have been a worry to Keyes, even if it was only in the deep recesses of his brain, that without Laycock's open support for the plan, there was the risk that it may not be given official approval to go ahead.

What is also clear is that although the two men disagreed about the raid and whether it should take place, they had total respect for each other as soldiers and officers of the British Army. Despite the fact that Laycock had tried to persuade Keyes not to lead the raid, he respected the fact that he was prepared to face the same dangers that he expected his men to face, knowing full well what they would be up against. It was Laycock who recommended Keyes for his award of the Victoria Cross, even though he had not personally witnessed any part of the actual raid leading up to when Keyes was shot and killed. A point that is often missing from this discussion, but warrants a mention, is that despite Laycock's concerns over the sense of the operation and the limited chances of being successfully evacuated in its aftermath, he still went along as part of the raiding party in support of Keyes.

The problem for such formations as 'Layforce' was that they, and the general concept of commando units, had never been fully embraced by senior officers of the British Army. It was not a concept which they particularly liked. For many of them having men who were specialists in a particular field such as explosives, communications or languages, or who could think for themselves and make decisions, whilst being part of a close knit team, was not something which they could readily accept.

Just five months after they had come in to being, the decision was taken that the ‘Layforce’ should be disbanded. Laycock was so annoyed by the way his unit and his men had been treated, he flew back to England to discuss his concerns with the War Office. One of the surprising aspects of this was that the man who had wanted Commando units raised in the first place, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, had not been consulted about the ‘Layforce’ being disbanded. He immediately ordered the formation of the Middle East Commando which was made up of men who had previously served with the Special Air Service, who at the time were known as L Detachment, the Special Boat Service and the men of No. 51 Commando.

Thankfully many of those who had been affected by the disbandment of the commando units decided to stay on in the Middle East rather than return to their parent regiments. The newly formed Commando as ordered by Winston Churchill was made up of six troops: L Detachment became No. 1 and No. 2 Troops; No. 3 Troop comprised of men who had previously served with No. 11 (Scottish) Commando; what had been No. 51 Commando became No. 4 Troop and No. 5 Troop, and No. 6 Troop consisted of men who had previously served with the Special Boat Service.

Whilst men from No. 1 and No. 2 Troops saw action as part of Operation Crusader, those of No. 3 Troop, under the overall command of Robert Laycock, were part of Operation Flipper.

On board HMS *Torbay* were Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Keyes, Captain Robin Campbell, Lieutenant Roy Cooke and twenty-five men. Keyes had in his possession a letter from Syed Idris, the Chief of the Senussi tribe, who was in exile in Egypt. The letter, written in Arabic, instructed his subjects to offer all aid and assistance that might be asked of them by Keyes and his men. On board HMS *Talisman* were Lieutenant Colonel Laycock, Captain Glennie, Lieutenant Sutherland and twenty-five men giving a total raiding party of fifty-six. It must have been a hellish journey for these men, who were not used to the life of a submariner, crammed up inside what for them must have been a claustrophobic environment.

It was only during the journey from Alexandria that Keyes broke the news to his men that the main purpose of their operation was to capture

Erwin Rommel, and either bring him back with them or kill him if he refused. This was later confirmed by Gunner James Gornall, who was part of the team under Lieutenant Roy Cooke, allocated to deal with the Cyrene crossing part of the operation, and who was on board HMS *Torbay* when Keyes briefed his men on the fact that Rommel was the main objective of the raid. Most of the men quickly guessed what Keyes already knew, that this was not going to be a straightforward operation by any stretch of the imagination.

The German historian, Hans Edelmaier has suggested that the purpose of the raid was not to kidnap or assassinate Rommel based on the fact that there was no mention of his name on the operations plan. If he is correct in his assumption, why did Keyes and his men force their way into a house at Beda Litorria. There would have been absolutely no point in doing this unless they were searching for a particular individual.

Laycock, Captain Glennie, Lieutenant Sutherland and a twenty-five commando team had travelled from Alexandria on board the British submarine, HMS *Talisman*. By the time Laycock and his team were preparing to come ashore, the weather had worsened greatly. The swell of the sea made it extremely difficult for Laycock's men to get off the submarine, into their boats and make their way inshore. In the end only Laycock and seven of his men made it off the submarine before the decision was taken that the seas were simply too dangerous to try and get any more of Laycock's men out. There was a real concern that to try and do so would risk the men being washed overboard to their deaths before they even made it ashore. This meant that the raiding party was now dangerously short of manpower, weapons, ammunition and explosives.

Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Keyes

Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Keyes, who was ever present during the planning stages of the operation, decided that he would be the one to lead the raiding party that would attack what was believed to be Rommel's headquarters. This decision was, in part, driven by a desire to emulate the achievements of his father, Admiral of the Fleet Roger John Brownlow Keyes, 1st Baron Keyes, who during the First World War had been in

command of the Dover Patrol. He had been heavily involved in the planning of the Dardanelles campaign, as well as the famous raids on the Belgian ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend. He also served at the beginning of the Second World War, when he was the first Director of Combined Operations and was responsible for putting in place the training of commandos and their subsequent raids on enemy-held coastlines. Later he was replaced because some of his ideas were deemed by senior military figures as being a bit too 'way out there', although the word 'impractical' would be better. But this was the very point of commandos and the work that they were asked to undertake, it was by its nature very dangerous. Success was not always guaranteed and life expectancy was far less than that of an ordinary soldier. Commando-style operations were of such an extreme nature that in most instances enemy forces would simply not expect to be attacked in such a way. That is what made the operations such a powerful tool, and the fact that the brave men who served in these units were willing to push the boundaries in what they were prepared to do.

Unbeknown to either Laycock or Keyes, Rommel's headquarters had only been at Beda Littoria for a very short period, and by the time of Operation Flipper, it hadn't been there for some considerable time. By the time of the raid, Rommel's headquarters had already moved to another nearby location before moving on to Tobruk weeks earlier.

It appears that Operation Flipper went ahead based purely on information provided by Captain John Haselden. The fact that the operation was planned and put into action is even more remarkable, as the information Haselden provided appears only to have been in relation to a vehicle that was believed to have been Rommel's staff car. There is no record of Haselden, or any of the friendly local Arabs with whom he was in contact, having actually reported seeing Rommel in the car or at Beda Littoria. Looking at this some eighty years after the actual events, it is hard to understand how and why this operation was ever approved, as there was nowhere near sufficient information or intelligence for it to go ahead.

It is as if those planning the operation just wanted it to go ahead regardless. With what is known about the planning, some very basic and rudimentary questions do not appear to have been asked. For instance, 'Has

anybody actually seen Rommel at that location? How many times has he been seen there? When was he last seen there? How is it known that the staff car in question was definitely Rommel's? Has Rommel been seen in the staff car?'

What makes Operation Flipper even more pointless was the fact that Rommel was not only in another country at the time of the raid, he was actually on another continent, in Rome, where he had gone on 1 November, trying to acquire some additional supply ships to replace those which had been sunk by the British Navy. The fact that British Military Intelligence did not know Rommel was in Rome at the time of the raid is at the very least a concern, although wartime movements were quite fluid and often occurred without any kind of warning. They did however belatedly discover this information on 17 November along with the fact that he was not due back in North Africa until the following day. This information was passed on to the Middle East Command, but too late for the operation to be curtailed.

The buildings which were to be attacked at Beda Littoria were by then the headquarters of General Heinz Schleusener, who was Oberquartiermeister der Panzergruppe Afrika, quartermaster of Panzer Group Africa. This was a position which he only held for four months between 15 August and 2 December 1941, after which time he was placed on the Army Reserve, before being reactivated and placed in command of the 342nd German Infantry Division on 1 May 1942. On 8 December 1942 Schleusener was awarded the Deutsches Kreuz in Gold.

Before looking at the actual raid itself, we will look at the timeline of events leading up to it.

Monday, 10 November 1941

On Monday, 10 November 1941 two British submarines, HMS *Torbay* and *Talisman*, sailed from Alexandria in Egypt at the start of Operation Flipper. They arrived at their destination on the evening of 14/15 November, a beach area at Khashm al-kalb on the Libyan coast some 250 miles behind enemy lines and approximately 18 miles from their intended target at Beda Littoria.

On 13 November 1941, Haselden went to the house of a pro-British Arab, Mudir of Slonta, from whom he borrowed a horse. Mudir also provided him with a trusted guide and the pair then made their way to the coastal village of Hamma in readiness for the arrival of the commandos.

HMS *Talisman* and HMS *Torbay* arrived at their target destination, about a mile out to sea, on 13 November and spent the next day checking out the intended landing beach at Khashm al-Kalb through their periscopes. Whilst their officers were busy doing that, the commandos were preparing themselves and their equipment for the task ahead. By their very nature such operations were extremely dangerous, and the thought no doubt went through their minds that this might well be the operation that they were not coming back from. They carried between them a variety of different weapons ranging from daggers to Bren guns, although there were many who favoured the reliable and dependable Thompson sub-machine gun. After they had finished their final preparations there was nothing else for the commandos to do other than rest, wait and try to relax. Besides their weapons they were also taking with them sufficient food, water and explosives.

Despite the detailed planning which goes in to such operations there is always the ‘what if ’ factor, plan ‘B’, or the eventuality that nobody had thought of or even considered. Operation Flipper was to be no different.

On the evening of 14 November 1941, the submarines HMS *Talisman* and HMS *Torbay* arrived off the Libyan coastline in readiness to drop off their two raiding parties. Unlike the relatively calm waters off Alexandria where the commandos had carried out their preparations for the raid, they found themselves in the midst of some of the worst weather seen in the region for years, with driving wind and heavy rain.

Whilst still submerged the submarines used their periscopes to scan the coastline for an identification code which would let them know that they were in the correct location. It took a while but eventually Haselden’s agreed signal was spotted by the submarines, to which they replied in the correct manner, allowing them to begin the final phase of their mission.

It was *Torbay* which moved closer to the beach first, in preparation to disembark Keyes and his men, whilst *Talisman* held her position and kept

watch. Keyes and his men tentatively made their way out on to the deck of *Torbay*, which with the weather worsening all the time was no easy task, made worse still by the total darkness and extremely heavy seas. Their rubber dinghies and supplies were passed out via the forward hatch. Once loaded they were slid off the side of the deck into the sea, but with the waves increasing in size, those that were on the deck were swept into the sea and those already there, capsized. The mayhem was eating into the window of opportunity that the darkness of the night provided for the raiding party from both submarines to get ashore. It took six hours before Keyes and his men, along with their supplies, made it into the dinghies and safely ashore on the beaches at Khashm al-Kalb, which literarily translates as 'The Dog's Nose'. They were guided on to the beach by two-man Special Boat Section teams who were in the 'folbots', folding canoes. The beach lay near the Libyan village of Hamama, by which time everybody was soaking wet, cold, and close to exhaustion. This part of the raid had taken just over an hour to complete during the training.

Laycock and his men on board *Talisman* had only been able to sit and wait helplessly until it was their turn to make their way to the beach. Their task had been made even harder because of worsening seas and limited time left for them to get ashore. Because of the extended time it had taken Keyes and his men to complete their journey to the beach, Laycock came close to taking the decision to postpone their journey. As it was, by the time he received the signal to say that he and his men should come ashore, there was only an estimated three and a half hours of darkness left, making it extremely tight time-wise, especially as it had taken Keyes and his men almost six hours to do the same.

As *Talisman* moved closer in to the beach, the submarine's commander Lieutenant Michael Wilmott made a slight misjudgement and the front of the vessel touched the bottom, this was sufficient to throw a number of dinghies and eleven of Laycock's men off the deck and into the sea, but only nine of them were safely recovered. In the time it took to get them back on board it was nearly daybreak. Lieutenant Wilmott decided that it was too risky to stay on the surface any longer, meaning that eighteen of Laycock's men never even made it off the submarine.

The loss of the two commandos caused another potential problem as there was now the possibility that their bodies might be washed ashore somewhere in the local vicinity and reported to Italian or German authorities, but Keyes and Laycock were both practical men and knew there was nothing they could do about it.

Those who actually made it to the beach were met by the calming figure that was Captain John Haselden, who had been dropped off by elements of the Long Range Desert Group. This was done in plenty of time so as to allow him to carry out reconnaissance in the area to make sure that Keyes, Laycock and their men didn't meet up with any enemy forces nearby. The decision had already been made that Keyes would lead the raiding party to their target whilst Laycock would remain at the landing point to ensure its security for the men's disembarkation after the raid. This meant that Lieutenant Colonel Keyes had to make the decision of either continuing with the mission or aborting it at that time. He decided to go ahead as planned, and hoped that the weather conditions might change so that the rest of the raiding party men could make it ashore.

In the circumstances the decision was taken to abandon the planned attacks at Cyrene and Apollina and to focus on locating Rommel and destroying radio communications between Faidia and Lamluda.

With the commandos having landed on the beach, Captain Haselden left Laycock and Keyes to sort themselves out whilst he and his men carried out their portion of the raid, which was to destroy radio communications equipment near Slonta, after which they were collected by the same unit of the Long Range Desert Group who had dropped them off.

Lieutenant Cook and six men were allocated to take out the telephone and telegraph communications that were just south of Cyrene. When it was clear that no more of their men were going to make it ashore the decision was taken to move off the beach which offered neither cover nor protection from the inclement weather. The nearby wadi they ended up in was not much better, as by then all the men were wet through, cold and lying outside open to the elements. Despite these hardships they lay there throughout the remainder of the night and for most of the following day, 15 November, before Keyes and his men began their journey at dusk to their

target at Beda Littoria, which would take them four days; this was after having spent the previous four days cramped up inside a submarine.

The journey to Beda Littoria would have been an arduous one for the commando raiding party, as they strode out across uneven ground in heavy rain, travelling during the hours of darkness so as not to be spotted by either unfriendly Arabs or German patrols. Rain and the accompanying inclement weather were unusual for North Africa in November, but was a blessing in disguise for Keyes and his men, as the noise and poor visibility which came with it would greatly reduce their chances of being discovered by inquisitive Arabs or enemy patrols.

It would not have been carried out at a slow and steady pace. The men had to make the journey as quickly as possible, because the longer it took them the greater the risk of their presence in the area being discovered. The problems with travelling on foot during the hours of darkness were many. To begin with they had to contend with the cold, rain and darkness. One of those elements on its own could be bad enough to deal with, but all three together required hardy men to be able to simply take it in their stride and focus on the job in hand.

The darkness made it difficult for each man to be able to see the man in front, whilst having to concentrate on every step they took to make sure they didn't stumble and fall, or twist and break an ankle. Then there was the cold, which they needed to take seriously because of the risk of hypothermia, a real and present danger made even worse by the rain. With their uniforms wet through they became cold and heavy, which added even more weight to the equipment that they were carrying. There was little respite during the day, because although they did not march while it was light, allowing them the opportunity to recover some of their lost energy, all they could do was to sit around or sleep in their sodden uniforms. There were no spare dry uniforms for any of them to change into.

At the time of Operation Flipper commando units were indistinguishable from the normal everyday British soldier as they wore exactly the same uniform. Their headgear was, in 1941, the slightly modified Mark II Brodie Helmet which hadn't changed much since the First World War. In 1942 the headgear of the commandos changed to that of the Helmet Steel Airborne

Troop, or the HSAT. The uniform, or to give its official name, ‘battledress’, which was often referred to as the ‘1937 Pattern’ although it wasn’t, consisted of trousers and a short jacket that were both made of heavy wool serge.

Out of necessity commandos needed to be able to move quickly and to cover long distances. To be able to do this they could not afford to carry large amounts of heavy equipment that would slow them down and impede their movement. Their usual weapons of choice included Bren guns and Thompson sub-machine guns. Initially they also carried the Webley revolver, which had been in use with the British Army since the First World War. This in turn was replaced by the American Colt 1911A1 pistol, mainly because its ammunition could also be used in their other weapons.

On the evening of 15 November as darkness fell it was time to begin the operation in earnest. Lieutenant Colonel Keyes gathered his men and gave them their final briefing and made sure that they had all the equipment they required. As if the darkness wasn’t going to make matters difficult enough for them, it suddenly became a lot colder and started to rain yet again.

As the men readied themselves for what lay ahead, Laycock and Keyes stood to one side so that they could talk in private. In essence the conversation involved Laycock suggesting to Keyes that he should step down and let one of his junior officers lead the raiding party instead. There was no argument or heated words between the two men, just a simple disagreement. Keyes listened to what Laycock had to say, but did not, and was never going to, change his mind. He was always going to lead the raiding party. With that conversation out of the way and explosives and additional ammunition divided amongst his men, they set off into the night just after 8pm.

Captain Haselden had provided an experienced and trustworthy local guide to lead the men to their target, who were all heavily laden with kit and equipment needed for the operation. It would have been a difficult enough journey to undertake in ideal conditions, but as Keyes and his men set off, in addition to the dark, cold and rain they also had to navigate, not one, but two steep terraces which took them up to a height of 1,200 feet above sea level. They reached the plateau at the top of this climb about midnight on

15 November, but as they did, their Arab guide suddenly stopped without any warning, and refused to go any further as he was afraid that he might be captured by the Germans. This left Keyes having to rely on an old map and a compass to get them to their intended target. Fortunately for Keyes they met up with a group of friendly Arabs who, for a small sum of money agreed to take them to where they wanted to go. By this time they were still some five miles away from their target at Beda Littoria.

They couldn't take the chance of being out in the open during the daylight hours, so they holed up in a cave for the whole of the following day (16 November) giving them the opportunity to rest, keep as warm as possible, and eat some much needed food to keep their energy levels up. The keeping warm aspect wasn't easy as all of them were still in their soaking wet uniforms and spent most of the time shivering from the cold, but lighting a fire was out of the question in case the smoke was noticed by the Germans or inquisitive local Arabs.

Despite the fact they had the relative shelter of the cave to shield them from the elements, outside it rained torrentially for the entire day. By the time they were ready to leave, there was still no let-up in the inclement weather, if anything it had worsened. It was still raining, the wind had an icy chill to it, and the thunder and lightning was producing a light show in the skies above. After what was somewhere in the region of a five-hour march they finally reached the outskirts of Beda Littoria just before midnight on 16 November. It had been a difficult journey as the incessant rain had made the ground more of a quagmire, meaning for most of the time it was one step forward before slipping backwards even further. Fortunately for Keyes and his men, by the time they arrived, all was quiet which reduced the likelihood of them being discovered.

After having hidden up throughout the following day (17 November) the raiding parties set off that evening under cover of darkness, but it was not going to be an easy journey for any of them to get to their respective targets. They had to navigate their way across uneven surfaces underfoot, in total darkness and heavy rainfall made it worse because of their close proximity to the sea. Weighed down by their equipment and sodden clothing, they

were lucky to be able to keep up a pace of twenty minutes a mile, which meant their journey would have taken them around six hours to complete.

Having arrived at their target location in the early hours of 18 November, Keyes had to change his plans yet again from what had been set out in the original operation. Captain Haselden had been informed by some friendly local Arabs that Rommel's headquarters was now situated at Sidi-Rafa. On the assumption that they were friendly Arabs who were passing on what they believed to be factual information, the question was how could they have got it so wrong when by then Rommel's headquarters had been in Tobruk for some weeks. An operation which had been weeks in the making had to be changed at the very last minute on the say so of a so-called friendly Arab. Once again Keyes had a major decision to make: either abort the mission or continue, trusting the word of a man whose credibility rested on Haselden's say so. The entire operation had gone ahead based on Haselden having seen a German staff car, which for some reason he immediately assumed was Rommel's although he had not actually seen Rommel in it.

The raid

Having finally reached their destination, Keyes and his men must have been exhausted. It had rained persistently for the previous two days, leaving them soaked through, cold, tired and no doubt hungry. The rain had made the ground underfoot no better than a quagmire and with the raiding party wearing plimsoles, a very light footwear, in an effort to suppress excess noise, every step they took must have been no better than walking on a skating rink. The men, as was normal practice for such night time raids, had all blackened their faces in an effort to blend more easily with the night time environment, but as it had been raining for the previous forty-eight hours, it is anybody's guess as to how they actually looked by the time of the actual raid.

Keyes gave himself some thinking time so that he could familiarise himself with what he was seeing. In the meantime all his men could do was wait in the pouring rain, whilst he made his mind up what to do next. The building Keyes was focusing on he could see was surrounded by barbed

wire, but it was more a gesture than an attack – preventing mechanism. He cut his way through the offending wire, with the rain which had previously been such a hinderance now acting in their favour as it ensured that the German soldiers on guard duty didn't venture out from the relative comfort of their tents. One of them either 'hadn't received the message', needed to go to the toilet or have a cigarette; whatever the reason it was a decision which cost him his life, as Keyes, quickly taking the initiative, silenced him before being joined by the rest of his men.

Nearby he could also see a number of other buildings, most of which he could make out were official premises rather than residential homes, although there were a number of the latter spread out nearby as well. The main issue, of course, was that there was still no sign of Rommel, his staff car, or a sufficient number of guards that one might well have expected to be in place to protect such a high-ranking German officer. As we all know, hindsight is a wonderful thing, but if Keyes had any doubts as to whether or not Rommel was 'at home' or on the balance of probabilities, he believed that he might well not be there, why carry out the assault at all? Why not simply return to their drop off point, get picked up by submarine as had been planned, return to their base and have Keyes explain the reasons behind his decision making?

As it was, two of the raiding party, including Keyes himself, were killed and a further twenty-eight were captured, three of whom were wounded.

Keyes needed to get in closer so that he was as clear as possible about the layout and design of the property he and his men were going to attack; after all there was every chance that one or more of his men would not survive their evening's work. The last thing he needed was to put them into even more danger than they were already in.

As they moved closer to the target premises, a six-floored building, they found themselves in the midst of a number of Arab dwellings. Despite their presence and the noise that they made, none of the locals were disturbed and the streets remained empty. The time for watching was over; the need to get on with the operation was paramount before their presence drew more than a passing interest from one or two of the locals. With this in mind Keyes and one of his men moved forward under the cover of darkness to

locate the best entry points to the target premises and ascertain what problems any German defences there were likely to cause them. The two men were gone for about thirty minutes whilst the rest of the raiding party waited as patiently as they could in the circumstances.

Unbeknown to Keyes and his men the Quartermaster General Major Schleusener was not at the villa as he was sick with dysentery and laid up at the nearby Appolloma hospital. It wasn't just Schleusener who was in poor health; his deputy was in the same hospital suffering from inflammation of the lungs. The deputy's adjutant had also gone down with dysentery, leaving the Acting Quartermaster as Captain G. Weitz, with his deputy being Major Poeschell.

As Keyes and Captain Campbell skirted the building, it became clear from the number of lights that could be seen coming from inside that the building was occupied. All that couldn't be ascertained was how many Germans they would be up against, where any reserves might be, and how quickly they would appear if they were called upon during the raid. It was on his return that Keyes indicated to Lieutenant Cooke that it was time for him and his men to fulfil their part of the operation by destroying the German communications installations at nearby Cyrene. By now, wet through and cold, all the raiding party just wanted was to get on with the raid, do what they had to do, return to their rendezvous point and get back to their base.

Lieutenant Cooke and his men arrived at their location ready to carry out their allotted task. By blowing up the mast they would prevent enemy forces from being able to communicate with each other for miles around. Cutting the cables was the easy part, but they also had to blow up the mast in the belief that this would disrupt enemy forces in the area for some time to come. Unfortunately during the planning stage of the operation, nobody appears to have considered the possibility that the fuses they would need to use to complete their task might get wet during the course of the operation – which they did. This prevented Cooke's men from being able to permanently put the site out of action. The damage they ended up causing was so minimal, it negated their part of the operation. Their job done, it was time to return to the rendezvous point on the beach, but Lieutenant Cooke

realised that trying to make such a journey in the dark and in severe weather was likely to result in injury or the unnecessary deaths of some of his men.

The following morning, on 19 November 1941, Second Lieutenant Alfredo Sandulli Mercuro and his men of the 3rd Platoon, 2nd Company, 1st Battalion, Paracadutisti Carabinieri Reali, discovered what they thought were a band of Arabs. One of the men with Lieutenant Mercuro was an Arab interpreter, who called out to challenge the group. The response was met with gunfire and it was then that the Italian paratroopers realised they were not dealing with a group of Arabs, but British commandos, who withdrew back into the cave they had spent the night in and where they had been intending to spend the rest of the day until it was dark enough to make good their escape. With no way out, the wounded commandos had no option but to surrender after Mercuro threatened to use flamethrowers and grenades on them.

As Cooke and his men stepped out of the cave into the daylight they found themselves facing two heavy machine guns. Cooke didn't have to say a word to his men. It was clear to everyone of them that if they took one more step they would be killed. They laid their guns on the ground, raised their hands in the air and surrendered.

The Italian paratroopers took prisoner a group consisting of an officer, one NCO and three other ranks. Except for the officer, all the British commandos were wounded and received medical treatment from the Italians. Mercuro searched the cave and found small arms and three demolition charges. Three of the Italians were wounded during the fight.

Meanwhile, having set off from their last hold up point at around 6pm on the evening of 17 November, Keyes had anticipated that it would take him and his men about six hours to reach 'Rommel's villa' due to the fact they would be making their journey during a thunderstorm, in total darkness and with ground conditions deteriorating by the minute. They were finally in position and ready to begin their attack just before midnight. There are differing German and British accounts of what took place that evening.

There was certainly nothing complicated about the plan. Keyes had split his men into three teams for the final assault. The actual assault party

consisted of Keyes, Captain Campbell, Sergeant Jack Terry, Lance Corporal Dennis Coulthard, Lance Bombardier A. Brodie and an Arab interpreter, Drori. Another of the teams was a covering party for the assault team to prevent them from being surprised by German soldiers coming in behind them from any of the nearby buildings. The third team was also a covering party, but slightly further out providing a wider perimeter of security. To ensure that each of the teams didn't end up accidently shooting each other in the confusion of battle, they had a password – 'Island' – with the challenge word being 'Arran'.

It was simply a case of walking up to the front door of the villa, banging on it very loudly whilst Captain Campbell demanded entry in German. Alarm bells should have started ringing straightaway. Here they were knocking on the front door of what they believed was the headquarters of one of the most revered and important figures in the German Army and there wasn't a sentry to be seen anywhere. No security gate or lights, no machine gun positions or any guards patrolling with guard dogs. A military raid beginning with a polite knock is quite unheard of in this author's experience and research.

Inside were Captain Weitz, Major Poeschell, a number of other junior officers, orderlies, runners and drivers who had spent the evening just sitting around, whiling away the hours listening to the thunderstorm outside, but by the time of the raid had retired to their rooms on the ground and first floors where they slept on military issue camp beds. The only one of them who hadn't retired was Private Max Boxhammer, who was in the guard room on the ground floor. His main function was to deliver any mail or messages that arrived.

Despite not knowing who was actually outside trying to get in, Boxhammer eventually opened the door. Waiting to force their way in were Lieutenant Colonel Keyes, Captain Campbell and Sergeant Terry, but the combined weight of the three men was insufficient to barge their way past the somewhat startled, but strong and powerfully built German guard, who somehow managed to keep them all at bay until he was shot by Captain Campbell. Although this gained them entry it also alerted all the other Germans in the building that something was amiss. With the benefit of

hindsight it would have been more prudent to have despatched the German guard by stabbing him with a knife, which might have been their initial intention, but when unable to reach him with a dagger, they had no option but to shoot him so as to get into the building. At about the same time an electricity power station no more than thirty yards away, exploded, the work of the men of the outer covering party, but because of the noise of the thunderstorm, it, nor the shooting of Private Boxhammer was hardly noticed.

With any element of surprise now lost, there was no need to worry about making too much noise. Normal procedure for conducting such a search would have been to stand to the side of the door to a room, quickly open it, throw in a grenade, wait for the explosion, step in and to the side and open fire. This manner of doing things is for the safety of those carrying out the attack and to reduce the chances of them being shot. For some reason these tactics were not deployed.

This was the point of no return. There was definitely no turning back now. It was a case of hoping that the three of them could deal with however many Germans there were in the building no matter how heavily armed they were.

As Boxhammer dropped to the floor wounded, he fell against the door of what turned out to be the munitions room, which woke up its three occupants, Sergeant Major Lentzen, Sergeant Kovacic, and a private, who used it as their sleeping quarters. Lentzen and Kovacic quickly grabbed their pistols unsure at that stage what all the commotion was about. At the same time, Lieutenant Kaufholz, who had been asleep in a room on the first floor, was also woken up, jumped out of bed and grabbed his pistol.

Lentzen beat Kovacic to the door of their room, pulled it open to be confronted by a darkened figure and opened fire. At the same time Keyes threw two hand grenades into the room. The subsequent blast knocked Lentzen over, but he was unscathed, whilst Kovacic was killed by the explosion. The un-named private who was still in his bed, was also unhurt. In the room adjoining, which was only separated by a partition of plywood, was Lieutenant Jaeger, who was literally blown out of his bed. Jaeger, who was still in his pyjamas, didn’t hang about to find out what was going on,

instead he jumped out of a window and was just about to run off when he was shot dead by a machine gun burst fired by one of the commandos who had been keeping guard outside.

By now Lieutenant Kaufholz was running down the stairs from his room on the first floor, with his pistol in hand. Halfway down he spotted figures in the hallway, silhouetted by the remnants of the exploding grenades.

The German version of what happened next is that Kaufholz opened fire, one of his rounds struck Keyes with what would be a fatal wound. Almost simultaneously Campbell turned and opened fire on Kaufholz who was hit and wounded by the burst of fire, but as he fell to the floor he returned fire with one of his rounds striking Campbell in the shin. The British version is that Keyes was shot by Sergeant Major Lentzen when he initially opened the door to the munitions room, and that Campbell was accidentally shot by one of his own men on failing to give the password when he later ran round to the rear of the premises where they were located. The German version of the raid talks about five British commandos entering the building, where the British version only mentions three.

By now more German officers and soldiers who had been asleep on the first floor had been woken by the commotion. Two German soldiers suddenly appeared on the stairs leading down from the first floor, but the quick reactions and a burst of gun fire from Sergeant Terry's Thompson machine gun, saw them return just as quickly from whence they had come.

Taking into account that the major point of the operation was to capture or kill Rommel, something quite remarkable then happened, according to the British version of events. Rather than carrying on with the search of the building, Campbell and Terry took hold of the mortally wounded Keyes and dragged him outside where he died almost immediately. Captain Campbell went back into the building to ensure that he and his men were not about to be attacked by a now fully alert group of German soldiers. Having found no sign of life, Campbell came back outside, before running round to the back of the building where a group of his men had been providing cover and protection for himself, Keyes and Terry on their initial entry. Due no doubt to a combination of over excitement and enthusiasm, Campbell forgot to call out to his men. In the dark he would have appeared to be just another

person to them and with no way of discerning whether he was British or German, the commandos were not about to take any chances. One of them opened up with his Thompson sub-machine gun and one of the bullets caught Campbell in the lower leg, breaking his shin bone.

The German version of this was, as stated above, that Campbell was struck by a bullet fired by Lieutenant Kaufholz after having been shot by Campbell. The British version, which makes no mention of Campbell having been shot by Kaufholtz inside the building, also mentions that at about the same time Campbell and Kaufholz exchanged fire in the building, Sergeant Terry heard what was actually Lieutenant Jaeger being shot dead outside by one of the other commandos. He took this to mean that a firefight was taking place outside, causing him and his two colleagues to leave Keyes and Campbell where they had fallen inside the building. The brave and wounded Boxhammer followed Terry and his two comrades out of the building to see what was going on, only to be fired on by all three of them. This time he did not get up.

Returning to the British version of events, Campbell ordered Sergeant Terry to gather the rest of the raiding party and get them to throw their grenades through the windows of the building and then escape as best they could, but to leave him behind. It was the right and honourable thing for him to do. Campbell could do no more than lie on the ground and wait to be captured.

The commandos who had been sent to the rear of the building were meant to force an entry on confirmation that the main raiding party had entered the front of the premises, but they had been unable to do so.

The back door led directly into what was a small office and immediately below that was a cellar accessible via a small spiral staircase. This was the sleeping quarters of Sergeant Major Alfons who, despite being some 250 miles behind the German front lines, took no risks when it came to security, especially when that involved himself. Amazingly the back door did not have a lock which was obviously not good practice. In an effort to afford himself and the building some kind of protection, Alfons, an elderly man by all accounts, had crammed the office full of tables, chairs, a full size metal cabinet and a large jerry can full of water. Although basic in design, Alfons'

security measures held firm when the British commandos who had been tasked to enter the building via the back door had tried to do so.

All of the above action had only taken a matter of minutes to unfold. By now more German officers who had been sleeping upstairs had woken and began making their way downstairs armed with a combination of torches, pistols and machine-guns. Halfway down the stairs they came across the body of Lieutenant Kaufholz, and in the entrance hall corridor lay the body of a British officer who was wearing a woollen cap with a blackened face; it was Lieutenant Colonel Keyes. His body had two bullet wounds, the round that had caused his death, and which had been fired by Lieutenant Kaufholz, had struck him in the chest, breaking his sternum, before being deflected into his heart and lungs. The other wound was to one of his thighs and had been fired by Sergeant Major Lentzen when he opened the door to be surprised and confronted by Keyes attempting to get into his room.

Propped up against the wall next to the door of the munitions office they discovered Captain Campbell, who by the trail of blood he had left appeared to have been trying to crawl out of the building. In his wounded state he offered no resistance and was immediately taken prisoner. Outside the front of the building they found the bodies of their fallen comrades, Lieutenant Jaeger and Private Boxhammer.

Interrogated by German officers he gave nothing away as to the reason for the raid, the answer of which would have been difficult for them to understand. Campbell's leg was in a bad way, as the round, which had either been fired from one of his own men's Thompson sub-machine guns, or by Lieutenant Kaufholz, had shattered his shin bone. He was taken to the nearby German hospital at Dema where he was treated by one of the hospital's surgeons, Doctor Werner Junge. Campbell's leg was so badly shattered that by rights it should have been amputated as there was little chance of putting the shattered bones back together again and the threat of infection was grave.

As Doctor Junge spoke fluent English he had been ordered to try and question Campbell about the raid, unfortunately for the Germans, Junge had been instructed to do so in front of Campbell who was of course fluent in German. When Junge begun making small-talk with him Campbell said to

him in German, words to the effect of, ‘You needn’t bother. You won’t get anything out of me.’

So as to give Campbell a chance of keeping his leg Junge encased it in plaster of Paris, hoping that the stability would help in its recovery. Campbell had to be evacuated from the hospital along with the other patients who in the main were either German or Italian, and flown to a military hospital in Italy. Eventually, and despite the best efforts of the Italian doctors, Campbell’s leg had to be amputated.

Both Campbell and Terry knew that if any of them had any chance of making their way back to the beach and escaping, they were not going to do it if they had to drag and carry an incapacitated Campbell more than eighteen miles over wet and uneven ground.

Prior to the raid Keyes had allocated seven of his men to position themselves around the outside of the building, so that between them they could cover all of the windows and take out anybody who tried to exit the building via any of the windows. There was no need to worry about the potential of shooting any of their own men as there was no way Keyes, Captain Chapman or Sergeant Terry, if they survived the raid, would be coming out of the building via any other exit other than the front door. Four more of the raiding party were allocated to set explosive devices around the headquarters building, the transport pool. This was to be done in the hope that it would help to spread panic and uncertainty amongst the remaining Germans who would be attracted by the raiding party’s gun fire and explosions, but the commandos were unsuccessful in their attempts as their detonators had become too wet to work properly.

After the raid had been carried out the escape plan set the first meeting point at the far side of the ‘local’ homes, and from there, once everybody was accounted for, it was then a case of making their way back to the beach as quickly as they could to give them as much time as possible to escape before they were discovered.

Their comrades who had being tasked with destroying a nearby generator, had better luck and managed put it out of action by using explosives that were then set off by grenades. Guards from the nearby barracks became aware of the commotion and began making their way to

the headquarters building. Sergeant Terry, who was now the man in charge, ordered the commandos to regroup at the Arab dwellings prior to withdrawing to the beach.

The commandos began their withdrawal, but after only a mile into their journey Sergeant Terry decided that to go any further in the dark, accompanied by heavy rain over the terrain that they would have to traverse, and knowing that they had to descend a dangerous escarpment on the way, was not the best option to take. The diligent sergeant took the decision that they would go no further that night. So despite being soaked to the skin, they spent the rest of the night and the whole of the following day huddled together, trying to keep as warm as they could, which was no mean feat.

What would have gnawed away at Terry and the remainder of his men as they lay on the sodden ground waiting for the dawn, was the belief that they had failed in their mission to capture Rommel – not of course knowing that he was never there in the first place. The other point worth noting here was whether any of them would have actually been able to identify Rommel even if he had been there.

After continuing their journey the following evening, Sergeant Terry and his men finally made their way down the escarpment and met up as planned with Lieutenant Colonel Laycock and his commandos who had been patiently waiting in the wadi near the beach. Including Lieutenant Cooke and his men, there were still twelve of the raiding party unaccounted for.

After recovering from the operation on his wounded leg at Dema, attempts were once again made to interrogate Captain Campbell as to the purpose of the raid, but other than providing his name, rank and service number, he told the Germans nothing about the purpose of the mission. No doubt the Germans would have smiled, maybe even going as far as to burst into laughter, if Campbell had explained that he and his comrades were there to capture Rommel. On this occasion silence was the better option and allowed Campbell to keep his credibility. The fact that it hadn’t even crossed the minds of the Germans that the reason for the raid was an attempt to kidnap or kill Rommel, spoke volumes about just how wrong the British operation had been.

Throughout the raid Lieutenant Colonel Laycock and three of his men had remained at the rendezvous point on the beach to look after the reserve ammunition, to secure the location for the evacuation after the raid was over, and just in case there was a favourable change in the weather, which would allow for the rest of the original raiding party to make their way ashore.

A group of British commandos had been spotted by an Italian Military Police unit, and in an attempt to escape capture had ended up backing into a cave. Initially the Italians believed they were dealing with a group of Arabs, but when they challenged them in Arabic the reply came in the form of a burst of machine gun fire. It was then that the Italians realised they had discovered a group of the fleeing commandos from the raid at Beda Littoria. After a fire fight that lasted somewhere in the region of two hours, the Italians then threatened to use a flame thrower on them, the commandos realised they had no other option other than to surrender. This group was most probably Lieutenant Cooke and the remnants of his men.

Sergeant Jack Terry and the remaining seventeen men of his raiding party finally made it back to Laycock's location in the early hours of 18 November, but nothing was heard from Lieutenant Cooke or any of his six men. Laycock of course had no way of knowing that Cooke and his men had already been captured. All he could assume was that the worst had happened to them. Either way, they wouldn't be making their way back to the beach.

Later the same day, just after dark, Laycock spotted the submarine HMS *Torbay*, which he then signalled with an Aldis lamp to let them know that those who had survived were ready to be collected. The seas were far too rough for the submarine to get in close enough to the shore line to collect the raiding party; it also quickly became clear that their rendezvous location had already been discovered by enemy forces and that it wouldn't be long before they were on top of them.

The following morning arrived and they were still holed up in the caves that surrounded the beach, although the weather was much better than it had been in days. If it stayed the same and they could hold out until darkness,

Laycock was convinced that they would be rescued, but events overtook them and the evacuation never took place.

Around noon the next day, Laycock and his men were fired upon by a unit of Italian carabinieri who had discovered their location. After a fire fight that lasted a couple of hours and knowing full well that it was only a matter of time before more heavily armed enemy reinforcements arrived, Laycock realised that he and his men were in a precarious position. He had to act fast before they all became trapped on the beach. He then gave the order for his men to split in to small groups and escape the best way they could – in essence it was every man for himself. A badly wounded man was left behind on the beach along with a medic who had volunteered to stay with him.

Initially German soldiers and Italian Military Police units had spent days searching and looking for the commandos, and interrogating any Arab tribesmen they came across in an attempt to discover the whereabouts of the fleeing British soldiers. No one was saying a word, that was until one of the Italian policemen, who was knowledgeable of local ways and customs, suggested offering bribes to the tribesmen and their families. The tactic worked better than could have been expected.

Many of the commandos who had sought assistance from the ‘friendly’ Senussi tribesmen were betrayed for nothing more valuable than large quantities of flour and sugar, despite the fact they had already taken money from the British soldiers.

Of all of the men who landed on the beach and took an active part in Operation Flipper, only three of managed to escape and make it back to British lines. Lieutenant Colonel Laycock and Sergeant Jack Terry survived for a total of thirty-seven days in a desert environment before completing their escape. They eventually arrived at Cyrene on Christmas Day 1941, whilst Bombardier John Brittlebank of the Royal Artillery, No. 8 Commando and No. 1 Special Boat Service, managed to survive for forty days in the desert before making it back to British lines. Lance Corporal Larry J. Codd managed to get as far as Tobruk before he was captured by the Italians, but they didn’t manage to hold him for long before he escaped and also made it back to Allied lines and freedom.

All of the other men who took part in the operation were either killed or captured and taken as prisoners of war.

On 2 November, the Special Operations Executive had been informed by Ultra, an Allied intelligence project which had managed to break and decode the encrypted radio communications of the German armed forces, that Rommel had left Libya for Rome. But despite the fact that the commandos did not leave Alexandria in Egypt until 10 November, this information had never been passed on to Keyes or any other senior officer involved in the operation, before it had begun. The obvious question is why?

As for the mistake by Haselden and his spies, it was a costly one, but the bigger question is why the information they supplied was so readily accepted.

The possible confusion by Hasleden's Arab spies could have arisen because Schleusener was roughly the same size as Rommel, in height, at 5 feet 6 inches, and also a similar weight. To compound the situation the chances are that because of security surrounding Schleusener headquarters, any identification would have to be made from some distance. Add to this that Rommel had visited the location and both he and Schleusener wore similar uniforms.

When Rommel was informed of the raid and the death of Lieutenant Colonel Keyes, and four German soldiers, he sent orders that they should all be buried with full military honours in the local Catholic cemetery, the Franciscan Maria Immacolata Parish Church. Apparently, he was also surprised that the British would believe that his headquarters might be situated at Beda Littoria, more than 500 miles away from the front line fighting. It has to be said that Rommel makes a fair point, and it is quite surprising that during the planning stage of the operation, such a distance did not cause one single senior British officer to stop and think that a commanding officer could not effectively operate, nor be in proper control of his men, if he was located that far behind his main body of troops.

On his return to Cairo, Lieutenant Colonel Laycock recommended both Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Keyes and Sergeant Jack Terry for the Victoria

Cross. Keyes, who was killed in the raid, the son of Admiral of the Fleet Roger Keyes, was granted the award, but the 19-year-old Sergeant Terry, the son of a mere butcher, who had faced the same odds as Keyes, and who courageously and safely brought the surviving commandos back to the beach, was only awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal. The other surprise is that Laycock, the officer who made the recommendation for Keyes to be awarded the Victoria Cross, had not actually witnessed the actions for which he made the recommendation. He was going purely on what he had been told by Sergeant Terry.

Here is the citation for the Distinguished Conduct Medal awarded to Sergeant Jack Terry, which appeared in *The London Gazette* on 24 February 1942:

At Sidi Rafa. After capsizing in his boat during the landing from the submarine and after an exacting march over 18 miles of mountainous country in drenching rain, Sgt Terry, in company with 2 officers, forced an entrance to the German HQ at Sidi Rafa. He covered the two officers while they investigated the ground floor and prevented enemy interference by firing his Tommy Gun at guards who attempted to descend from the 1st floor. He afterwards entered a room and although fired at from the dark interior, he emptied two magazines into it. When the commander of his detachment was killed, he conducted his party successfully back to the beach. On retirement from the beach, after ordering his party to disperse and take to the hills in compliance with instructions, Sgt Terry remained behind under heavy fire, and waited for his Commanding Officer who had hurt his knee. He remained in his company behind enemy lines for 41 days until they were able to re-join our own advancing troops.

The following is a newspaper cutting from the Scottish *Daily Express* dated Thursday, 9 July 1942, concerning the raid on Rommel's headquarters.

UP ROMMEL'S HQ
Swam ashore from
Commando submarine

Twenty-three survivors of the British Commando raid on Rommel's headquarters in which Colonel Keyes won the VC, are now interned in Italy, it is revealed by repatriated New Zealanders.

They include Sergeant Charles Nicol, of Aberdeen; Sergeant Charles Bruce, Brechin, Angus; and Bombardier D. Brodie of Ballinluig, Perthshire.

They and other Commandos told the New Zealanders that they had been taken up the coast by submarine. They were at first unable to land at their destination because of storm, but on the following night they put off in rubber boats, one of which capsized. Some of the men swam ashore in life belts. Sergeant Bruce was nearly drowned, but was dragged out by Sergeant Nicol.

On the beach which was swept by a gale, they were met by an intelligence officer (Captain Haselden) who was dressed as a desert nomad. He guided them to Rommel's headquarters. They travelled two days. On the final stage a thunderstorm soaked their bomb fuses.

While shooting up Rommel's house, Bombardier Brodie blew up the generating equipment with three bombs. Bad weather prevented the survivors from getting away by sea.

Sergeant Charles Bruce, a 41-year-old Brechin man, went to Australia when he was 21. He was working on a farm there when war broke out. He tried to enlist, but without success, so he came home, volunteered and joined an Army unit in December 1939, transferring to the Commandos more than a year ago. His parents, Mr and Mrs Charles Bruce, of Montrose Street, Brechin have had letters from him since he was taken prisoner.

Ex-Ploughman

Villagers of Ballinluig, Perthshire, didn't know that Bombardier Brodie, 27-year-old ex-local ploughman and forester had been in the raid. He is the son of the late Mr and Mrs G. Brodie, West Balnald. His sister, Mrs Dochart, of Buailbhan, Ballinluig, had received official notification that he was a prisoner of war in Italy, but she had not heard how or when he had been captured. Brodie served with a Royal Artillery unit before becoming a Commando. He volunteered for service in February 1940, and was in action in Syria.

Those who actually made it ashore and took part in the raid are listed below. This list is from the Wikipedia website on the topic of Operation Flipper which had initially been compiled by Michael Asher in 2004, which in turn was based on a list by German historian Hans Edelmaier, along with the Commando Association. Where possible it indicates which part of the raid each man took part in.

Unless otherwise stated each of the men were members of 11 Commando, and were either wounded, captured, or both. The list is in alphabetical order and should be comprehensive, but any missing man is the author's oversight.

Where possible, each man's parent regiment from which they were on attachment to the Commandos is included, along with any other relevant information that could be found about them.

Beach Party

Private E.C. Atkins – Beds & Herts Regiment.

Bombardier John Brittlebank – Royal Artillery and SBS. One of those who managed to escape and eventually made it back to England.

Lance Corporal 2332748 Lawrence 'Larry' Joseph Codd – Royal Signals.

Bombardier George Dunn – Royal Artillery.

Private Robert Fowler – Cameron Highlanders.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Laycock – Royal Horse Guards.

Sergeant Charles Nicol – Gordon Highlanders.

Lieutenant John Pryor – Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment and SBS.

Lance Corporal 7971182 Peter Charles Barrand, Rifle Brigade. Drowned before making it to the beach. His body was never recovered and his name is commemorated on the Alamein Memorial in Eqypt.

German Headquarters Assault Party

Lance Bombardier D.S. Brodie, Royal Artillery.

Acting Captain Robin F. Campbell, General List. He was wounded and captured.

Lance Corporal 3061447 Dennis E. Coulthread, Royal Scots.

Corporal/Interpreter Avishalom Drori, (Palestine), 51st Middle Eastern Commando.

Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Keyes, 2nd Dragoons, Royal Scots Greys, Royal Army Corps. Killed in Action during the raid on Rommel's 'headquarters'.

Sergeant Jack Terry, (Royal Artillery). He was one of those who managed to escape. He was recommended by Laycock for the Victoria Cross, but was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

German Headquarters Covering Party

Corporal William Heavysides, York and Lancashire Regiment. No record of him being attached to No. 11 Commando could be found.

Lance Corporal Malcolm Edward Hughes, Manchester Regiment.

Gunner/Bombardier Joseph F. Kearney, Newfoundland Royal Artillery.

Private 2934126 John A. Phiminster, Cameron Highlanders.

Private William Pryde, Cameron Highlanders.

Corporal H. Radcliff, Royal Army Service Corps, he was wounded and captured.

Lance Corporal Frank E. Varney, Sherwood Foresters.

German Headquarters Outside Covering Party

Private James Bogle, Gordon Highlanders.

Sergeant Charles Bruce, Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment).

Corporal Charles Lock, London Scottish Regiment.

Private Robert Murray, Highland Light Infantry.

Cyrene Crossroads Party

Lance Corporal 2931860 Frederick Birch, Liverpool Scottish (Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders). He was actually a member of No. 7 Commando and the 51st Mediterranean Commando. Birch had previously seen service during the fighting with German forces on the island of Crete, and had managed to escape. He was not so fortunate on this occasion.

Lieutenant Royston R. Cooke MC, Royal West Kent Regiment.

Gunner 3856286 James ‘Jim’ Gornall, Royal Artillery. Gornall later recorded the fact that Lieutenant Colonel Keyes briefed him and the rest of the raiding party who were on board the submarine HMS *Torbay* that the objective of the raid was to capture or kill Rommel. For his actions during Operation Flipper, Gornall was awarded the Military Medal.

Corporal John Kerr, Gordon Highlanders.

Lance Bombardier P. McCrae, Royal Artillery. No record of this man being a member of No. 11 Commando could be found.

Lance Bombardier Terrence O’Hagen, Royal Artillery.

Private Charles H. Paxton, Cameron Highlanders.

Lance Corporal 3319006 Donald Maclean MacQuarrie also took part in the raid, although it is unclear which party he was in. He was one of those who was wounded and captured. He subsequently died of his wounds whilst being held as a prisoner of war. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission records his death as having taken place on 31 December 1941, yet the original wooden cross that was placed on his grave at the Benghazi War Cemetery in Libya, clearly states his date of death as 31 December 1942.

Driver 2332752 D.H. ‘Dougie’ Stocks, Royal Signals. Once again, it is unclear which of the parties he served with during the raid, but he was wounded during the breakout phase of the operation, on 20 November 1941, after the mass break out from the beach. He was captured by the Germans and became a prisoner of war, but due to his injuries, he was repatriated back to the UK in 1943.

Allowing for the secrecy surrounding war time military intelligence, it is still somewhat of a surprise that there is no actual documentary evidence to support the suggestion that Captain Haselden ever reported that Rommel had been present at the premises that were the subject of the attack in Operation Flipper. The fact that Rommel was the object of the raid was not included in the operational order, which is strange, even for the clandestine world of military intelligence.

The other question, of course, was how were Keyes and the other members of the raiding party, in the heat of battle, ever going to be able to

expediently and conclusively identify Rommel.

Of the thirty-three British Commandos who took part in the raid, twenty-eight were captured, a number of whom were wounded. A further two men were killed during the raid, and the remaining three managed to escape.

With Captain Robin Campbell having been wounded and captured by the Germans, the only person to escape who witnessed most of the events involving Keyes' part in the raid was Sergeant Jack Terry. A recommendation for the award of the Victorious Cross usually has to include accounts from three individuals who witnessed the events.

The citation for the award reads as follows:

War Office, 19th June, 1942.
The KING has been graciously pleased to approve the posthumous award of the VICTORIA CROSS to the undermentioned officer: —

Major (temporary Lieutenant Colonel) Geoffrey Charles Tasker Keyes, M.C. (71081), The Royal Scots Greys (2nd Dragoons), Royal Armoured Corps (Buckingham).

Lieutenant-Colonel Keyes commanded a detachment of a force which landed some 250 miles behind the enemy lines to attack Headquarters, Base Installations and Communications.

From the outset Lieutenant Colonel Keyes deliberately selected for himself the command of the detachment detailed to attack what was undoubtedly the most hazardous of these objectives – the residence and Headquarters of the General Officer Commanding the German forces in North Africa. This attack, even if initially successful, meant almost certain death for those who took part in it.

He led his detachment without guides, in dangerous and precipitous country and in pitch darkness, and maintained by his stolid determination and powers of leadership the morale of the detachment. He then found himself forced to modify his original plans in the light of fresh information elicited from neighbouring Arabs, and was left with only one officer and an N.C.O. with whom to break into General Rommel's residence and deal with the guards and Headquarters Staff.

At zero hour on the night of 17th-18th November, 1941, having despatched the covering party to block the approaches to the house, he himself with two others crawled forward past the guards, through the surrounding fence and so up to the house itself. Without hesitation, he boldly led his party up to the front door, beat on the door and demanded entrance.

Unfortunately, when the door was opened, it was found impossible to overcome the sentry silently, and it was necessary to shoot him. The noise of the shot naturally aroused the inmates of the house and Lieutenant Colonel Keyes, appreciating that speed was now of the utmost importance, posted the N.C.O. at the foot of the stairs to prevent interference from the floor above.

Lieutenant Colonel Keyes, who instinctively took the lead, emptied his revolver with great success into the first room and was followed by the other officer who threw a grenade. Lieutenant Colonel Keyes with great daring then entered the second room on the ground floor but was shot almost immediately on flinging open the door and fell back into the passage mortally wounded. On being carried outside by his companions he died within a few minutes.

By his fearless disregard of the great dangers which he ran and of which he was fully aware, and by his magnificent leadership and outstanding gallantry, Lieutenant Colonel Keyes set an example of supreme self-sacrifice and devotion to duty.

The entire operation appears ill thought out and an absolute waste of time. It wasn't quite a suicide mission, but it still saw the loss of thirty highly trained and dedicated individuals, whose skills and abilities could have been utilised for the greater good, rather than spending the better part of four years in German prisoner of war camps, and for two of them, their unnecessary deaths.

As would be expected in the aftermath of such an operation the full circumstances of what had taken place would be looked at in some detail. If lessons were to be learned for similar raids in the future, this was something which had to take place no matter how unpalatable that process might have

been. Such occasions were not about inflated egos, they were about recognising if any part of the operation could have been improved upon. Could something have been carried out in a different yet more effective way? If mistakes had been made, they needed to be highlighted so that they were not repeated. Such raids always had an element of risk attached to them, the planners, officers and men who were involved understood that, but there was no point in sending a man to his death or capture if that didn't need to be the case because there was a better and safer way of doing something.

The raid had taken place just eighteen months after the commandos had been formed, and although there was no denying the bravery and heroism of the men of these units, there was an acceptance by all parties that these were still early days for them. To be blunt, the operation was an absolute failure, which saw lives lost unnecessarily, and a lot more who saw out the rest of the war in prison camps. The heroism and bravery of the men who took part in the raid is not open to question, but the tactics and implementation that were used, most definitely were.

One good thing that came out of the raid is that such a poorly planned one was not allowed in the future. It should come as no surprise that when senior military officers from the Combined Operations section reviewed the operation they quickly identified 'inadequate planning' and 'faulty intelligence' as the two main reasons for the failure of the operation. The sad thing is those failings were obvious from the very beginning. The real concern should have been around why the same flaws were not recognised at the planning stage, who approved it in the first place, and why.

There was still a war going on and men were needed to fight it, especially those with the skills and attributes of those who would volunteer to be commandos. After a suitable period of recuperation in Cairo, Laycock returned to the UK where he took command of the Special Service Brigade. As for Captain Haselden, he continued with his clandestine work, most of which was spent behind enemy lines, but he was killed in action during a British raid on Tobruk in September 1942.

In the aftermath of the operation there were clear lessons for both sides to learn. German forces needed to look at the level of their security which they

had in place at such military headquarters. The reality is that if Rommel had been discovered, he would no probably have been killed. In any future raids and missions, much better planning was needed and more emphasis had to be placed on being able to obtain up-to-date intelligence, where possible confirmed by other sources. If such a raid was going to be successful the element of surprise was needed for as long into the raid as possible. In the case of Operation Flipper, the sound of gun fire and exploding grenades had been heard so early in the raid that it greatly reduced the chances of it being successful.

Although Operational Flipper was a failure, it was also a diversionary operation for the Eighth Army's much more successful Operation Crusader, which saw some 100,000 men push Rommel's Afrika Korps back to Benghazi, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy forces in the process. For Lieutenant Colonel Sir Alan Cunningham, the commander of the Eighth Army, it was a professional success story, but on a personal level, it all proved too much and he suffered a nervous breakdown and was relieved of his command by General Sir Claude Auchinleck, who at the time was the commander-in-chief of British forces in the Middle East.

Chapter Three

What the Papers Had to Say

There was much confusion surrounding Rommel towards the end of the war. Was he alive, or was he dead? If it was the latter, where and when had he been killed, and who had been responsible for his death. Numerous reports concerning Rommel began appearing in the British Press despite whatever war time reporting restrictions were in place. Some of them made for interesting reading.

The interest surrounding Rommel from an Allied perspective was almost unprecedented, possibly because of how he had been built up by the Nazi propaganda machine, and in part what he had achieved with the Afrika Corps in North Africa whilst fighting Montgomery and the British Eighth Army.

Wednesday, 31 December 1941 saw an article appear on the front page of the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* newspaper, which had been written by the British United Press War Correspondent, Kenneth Downs.

200 Miles Behind Enemy Lines
Commandos in Rommel's HQ

Tough Commandos led by Colonel Geoffrey Keyes, son of Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, broke into Rommel's headquarters in the Libyan Desert, 200 miles behind the enemy lines. They hoped to catch Rommel himself, but he was away.

Instead, they shot their way in through the front door, shot German staff officers, and attacked others upstairs. Colonel Keyes himself was badly injured, and died outside Rommel's HQ. Lt. Col. Geoffrey Charles Tasker Keyes was only 24, and was formerly an officer in the Royal Scots Greys.

He went to Narvik as liaison officer with the Free French. Later he was awarded the Military Cross for his gallant conduct during a British Commando raid on enemy fortified positions at the River Litani in Syria.

Commando Chief

On that occasion his commanding officer and 120 men were killed when they stormed the enemy positions, but Captain Keyes, as he then was, took command and held the positions until the Australians were able to cross a bridge a relieve them.

The story of his gallant fight at Rommel's HQ, one of the most remarkable of the war, was told by a colleague, another lieutenant colonel, who must be referred to as 'Colonel Blank', since his identity may not be revealed. Three days before General Auchinleck began his invasion of Libya, Colonel Blank, with about thirty men, arrived 200 miles behind the enemy lines.

Orders were to attack a number of objectives near Sidi Rafa. For two days they lay up in a dried river bed, and on the night of November 17, made their attack. Their main objective was the administrative headquarters of the Africa Corps, where they hoped to catch Rommel. They discovered subsequently that Rommel was away at a birthday party.

Shot Way In

The small party detailed for this part of the operation was led by Lt.-Col. Keyes. Unable to gain access to Rommel's headquarters by the back door or by a window, they beat loudly upon the front door, and when it was opened shot their way in. Bursting into the first room they came across they found two German Staff officers and a number of other ranks. These they dispatched with Tommy guns and pistols.

The headquarters had meanwhile become thoroughly aroused and a number of Germans tried to come down the stairs shouting in German, 'What the hell's going on here?'

No 'Interference'

They were driven back by a sergeant of the Royal Artillery armed with a Tommy-gun. Others who sought to enter from the outside were driven off by the fire of two corporals armed with Tommy-guns and posted outside the headquarters.

Lt.-Col. Keyes, a captain, and a sergeant who were operating with him, meanwhile went further and threw open the door of a second room which they found in darkness. They could hear suppressed and stertorious breathing from the Germans inside. Lt.-Col. Keyes ran in, firing his revolver, but he was met by a volley of fire and fell back into the passage gravely wounded.

The sergeant went straight in and emptied the magazine of his Tommy-gun into the room. Fire still came from the room but the captain, yelling to the sergeant to duck, ran straight in and flung two hand grenades. Slamming the door, the captain and the sergeant carried Colonel Keyes outside, where he died within a few minutes.

Other members of the party meanwhile lobbed hand grenades through every convenient window and the captain, doubling round the building to supervise activities, had his leg broken by a stray round. Apart from this unlucky shot the enemy scarcely fought back at all, and a lull followed, during which the sergeant and the rest of the party started to make their way back, carrying the injured.

Plans Frustrated

The captain, knowing that the rendezvous with the rest of the party was nearly twenty miles away over most difficult country, handed them his remaining grenades, ordered them to complete their task by blowing up an electric light plant and to leave him propped up against a tree.

The sergeant gave the captain a shot of morphia and proceeded to carry out his orders. The party under the sergeant, succeeded in re-joining Colonel Blank, as arranged, and found that a good proportion of other parties had also reached the rendezvous. Owing to bad weather, the plan for evacuating the force was frustrated, and on the following day, November 19, a considerable party of the enemy, both German and Italian, attacked Colonel Blank's party.

After a brisk engagement, which lasted about two hours, Colonel Blank gave the order to adopt an alternative plan of retreating towards the east into the Jebel Akhbar area and awaiting the advance of our armoured forces.

Many Escapes

The force broke up as arranged, into a number of small parties. For many days numerous parties of Germans searched all river beds in the neighbourhood, and Colonel Blank and his sergeant had many narrow escapes.

Worse than the searching Huns was the shortage of food. Except for iron rations, which had been kept for emergency and one-eighth of which they still had with them when they eventually re-joined our forces forty-one days after their landing, they had nothing to eat but wild berries and an occasional goat.

Welcome Goat

First time they caught a goat they ate a few mouthfuls raw. The goat lasted them five days, and they were able to make the best of it as the sergeant in civil life was a butcher.

Almost worse than the shortage of food was the shortage of news. At moments, the colonel said, he would have given five years of his life to have had a wireless set. It was torture, he said, not to know how the battle was going, and whether it was safe for them to come out into the open and make their way to Tobruk, Cyrene, Appolonia, or Benghazi.

They decided eventually to chance it, and made their way to Cyrene, where they had a Christmas breakfast on what was to them the surpassing delicacy of bully-beef.

The captain referred to in the article is Captain Robin Campbell. The stray shot that broke his leg, was accidentally fired by one of his own men and did not come from anyone on the German side. The sergeant referred to was Sergeant Jack Terry and the man referred to as Colonel ‘Blank’, was in fact Lieutenant Colonel Robert ‘Lucky’ Laycock of the Royal Horse Guards. He

not only survived the war but continued in the Army afterwards, finally retiring in 1965 as Major General Sir Robert Laycock.

As a result of the attack, and for his part in it, Keyes was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. There was some controversy over the award as the citation for it was written by Laycock who had not actually witnessed Keyes' actions during the night of the raid which led to his subsequent death.

British historian and author James Owen, in his 2012 book *Commando*, highlighted the fact that in the aftermath of the raid, Keyes' body was recovered by the Germans who conducted a post-mortem on it. The German doctors who carried out the examination determined that their own men had not been responsible for firing the fatal shot which had killed him. But that he had, in the heat of battle, been accidentally shot by one of his own men.

This also brought in to question why Sergeant Jack Terry, who did the same if not more than Keyes did, was only awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and not the Victoria Cross. The DCM was discontinued in 1993 and replaced by the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross, which sits just below the level required for the award of the Victoria Cross.

The following article appeared on the front page of the *Lancashire Evening Post* dated Wednesday, 14 July 1943.

'Rommel Killed Flying to Sicily' Report

Has Field Marshal Rommel been killed? This was the mystery which puzzled the world today.

One fact is certain. A heavily escorted enemy transport 'plane' was shot down near Syracuse and the belief of the Allied advanced base on Sicily was that it 'may have been carrying a high-ranking Axis personality'.

The German underground station continued: 'British planes fought their way through a strong fighter escort and hit Rommel's plane with their guns. Rommel's plane then caught fire and crashed in to the sea.'

Flew From Rome

So far it seems certain that Field Marshal Rommel was in Rome and left by plane for Sicily. But whether he arrived there safely or whether the aircraft

was really shot down cannot be ascertained owing to lack of any official statement either in Berlin or Rome.

On Tuesday it was reported from Malta that Spitfires had shot down a Junkers 52 Transport plane which was escorted by more than thirty German and Italian fighters over the Sicilian coast. Six of the fighters were also shot down in flames.

Swiss radio this morning quoted reports from Sweden alleged to have been picked up from the German freedom station 'Gustav Siegried l,' that Rommel lost his life when shot down and that he was due to take over the command of the Axis troops in Sicily.

Neutral correspondents besieged the Ministry of Propaganda in Berlin this morning for information. Press Chief Dr Schmidt authorised a secretary to tell the journalists that there was no official statement to be expected at the present and refused to give any information, either confirming or denying the Swedish reports of Rommel's mishap.

Air Chief With Him

This refusal has led to more rumours of Rommel's death and reports giving several names of his companions who are alleged to have died with Rommel.

One of Rommel's companions according to Swiss reports was believed to be General of the Luftwaffe, Bernard Kuehl, Inspector General of the German Air Force for training, who is 57 years old, and was reported to have visited Italy a few weeks ago, returning recently to Berlin to report about his observations on the Reggia Aeronautica.

Another name mentioned is that of General Count Welhelm von Westphal, who has been in command of the 2nd Military District in Berlin and was recently given a divisional command. Von Westphal is in his late forties.

It is said that Rommel's plane took off at the Rome aerodrome of Idroscalo di Ostia with eleven passengers and crew. It was a large Junkers transport machine. Apart from Rommel and the two other German staff officers there were five Italian officers.

When searching for more information about von Westphal and Kuehl, no direct match could be found for either man, but the article shows not only the apparent high-esteem in which Rommel was held, but also the level of what could be classed as nigh on hysteria which surrounded the issue of whether he was alive or dead.

The *Stirling Observer* newspaper dated Thursday, 7 October 1943, included the following article. Although it did not relate to either Operation Flipper or Operation Gaff, it is still worthy of a mention.

Cpl. Alexander Carmoodie, R.A.C., son of Mr and Mrs Thomas Carmoodie, 39 Wallace Street, Stirling, who has reached this country under the scheme for repatriating battle experienced personnel, served as a tank commander in Africa, and on one occasion came close to capturing or killing Rommel, but the German's tank was too fast and he escaped. A former pupil of the Territorial School, Stirling, Cpl. Carmoodie joined up at the outbreak of the war. In peacetime he was employed as a clerk at a Central Scottish Government Depot. After the fall of France he was evacuated (from the beaches of Dunkirk) to this country and later proceeded to the Middle East.

Sunday, 30 July 1944, saw an article appear in the *Sunday Post* newspaper which included reports that Rommel had been wounded whilst another spoke of him having been killed. This was two weeks after he had actually been wounded when his staff car had been strafed by Allied air craft in the Normandy area of German occupied France. That incident also prevented a British assassination attempt on Rommel, as part of Operation Gaff.

Although nothing to do with an assassination attempt on Rommel's life, it highlights the importance he played not just the minds of the Allies, but the Germans as well. There was no other German during the course of the Second World War, other than Adolf Hitler, who drew so much attention over concerns as to whether they had been killed or not.

Rommel Reported Killed

Two reports were received last night, one that Rommel had been wounded, the other that he is dead. A German captain captured by the Americans said

Rommel has been wounded, cabled a Reuter correspondent from Normandy last night.

The car removing Rommel from the front overturned and left him unconscious by the side of the road for six hours. A later cable reports Rommel was wounded on July 17. Another German prisoner reported that Rommel is still in a serious condition.

A French woman in the Red Cross dealing with war prisoners was with the Germans two days ago. She declared German officers and men told her Rommel was wounded in the bombing near Falaise on the British front. He died later in hospital at Bernay.

The woman said officers and men stationed in this town had spoken of Rommel's death as an accepted fact.

This report lacks confirmation from any authoritative Allied sources.

The *Yorkshire Evening Post* newspaper dated Tuesday, 6 November 1945, included the following article:

Man who killed Rommel

Group Captain Johnnie Baldwin, D.S.O and bar, D.F.C and bar, Second Tactical Air Force, who led the raid which shot up and killed Field Marshal Rommel, is to marry Miss Sylvia Symon, elder daughter of Canon and Mrs Dudley Symon, of Woodbridge School, Suffolk. He was one of eight airmen who were officially credited with the killing of Rommel.

This is a clear reference to the strafing of Rommel's staff car in the Normandy countryside on 17 July 1944. The fact that Rommel, although badly injured, was not killed, goes to show the level of confusion which existed around Erwin Rommel.

Baldwin is one of a number of airmen, from American, Britain and Canada who were credited with the strafing of Rommel's staff car. Although it would have been clear to the pilot who carried out the attack that at least one of the occupants of the vehicle must have been a high-ranking German officer, there is no way that it could have been certain that the man in question was in fact, Erwin Rommel.

It was interesting to note that regardless of what the British authorities may or may not have known about Rommel's demise, in November 1945, the British Press were reporting that Rommel had been killed when his staff car was strafed by an RAF aircraft. This was despite the fact that German authorities announced at the time that Rommel had only been wounded in the attack. There was a certain irony attached in the fact that it was because of aircraft from Britain's RAF that the second attempt to assassinate Rommel failed.

As an aside, here is an article which appeared in the *Yorkshire Post* newspaper dated Tuesday, 18 March 1952, about Johnnie Baldwin, who by then had been promoted to the rank of Wing Commander.

Once credited with killing Rommel

Wing Commander Johnnie Baldwin, D.S.O., double D.F.C., and A.F.C., one of Britain's most famous fighter aces, is missing in Korea. He was on weather reconnaissance with other aircraft on Saturday. The planes are believed to have gone in to a cloud together but when the other aircraft came out, Baldwin's was not there. A search was made by the other pilots but no trace of him was found. There was no confirmation in London last night that Baldwin had been shot down.

Baldwin's total toll of enemy aircraft in the Second World War was more than sixteen, in addition to many damaged. In 1944 he was one of eight pilots at one time officially credited with killing Rommel on July 17, in the German general's staff car near Caen in Normandy.

During the Korean War he was one of four RAF pilots who were attached to the United States Air Force and became part of the 16th Fighter Interceptor Squadron of the 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing. Whilst flying a North American F-86 Sabre aircraft, in March 1952, he was reported as being missing in action, presumed dead. His body or aircraft have never been recovered.

It is interesting to see how sometimes an article in a newspaper is taken as an absolute truth, despite the fact that the reality is that it is just poor journalism. Here is such an example which appeared in the *West Lothian*

Courier newspaper on Friday, 9 July 1971, and was actually about the final demise of the Royal Scots Greys when they amalgamated with other regiments to become the Royal Scots Dragoons. The piece included the following paragraph, and shows how years after a particular event, a 'wrong' is still not always corrected.

In November 1941, a young officer of the Scots Greys, Geoffrey Keyes, aged 24 and with the rank of lieutenant colonel, landed in command of a small party from a submarine on the North African coast some 250 miles behind enemy lines. On the night of 18 November, he raided the German Headquarters with the main object of killing General Rommel, commander of the Afrika Corps. By a stroke of misfortune Rommel was away from his headquarters on that night, and Keyes was mortally wounded. He was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

As is now known Rommel's actual headquarters were not at Beda Littoria where the raid took place, and he had not been in Libya since 1 November 1941, when he had left to go to Rome to try and acquire extra merchant ships to replace those which had been sunk and destroyed by the British. Whilst in Rome he met up with his wife to celebrate his 50th birthday.

Chapter Four

Project Doctor – April 1943

The Special Operations Executive was a war time invention which came into being on 22 July 1940, just two months after Winston Churchill became Britain's second war time Prime Minister. It was part of the Ministry of Economic Warfare which came under the control of the Labour Member of Parliament, Edward Hugh John Neale Dalton, better known as Hugh Dalton.

Despite the fact that at its peak it had some 13,000 people working for it, more than 3,000 of whom were women, very few people knew that the SOE even existed. The organisation's remit initially was to conduct espionage, sabotage and reconnaissance throughout occupied Europe, although its sphere of operations was later changed to include both the occupied area of Southeast Asia and North Africa.

Those who worked for the SOE would, when talking about the organisation, or making reference to it, use such titles as 'Churchill's Secret Army', the 'Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare', or the 'Baker Street Irregulars', the latter being a reference to the organisation's headquarters in London. If discussions about the SOE took place for official purposes reference to them would be hidden for security reasons by using such titles as the 'Joint Technical Board' or the 'Inter-Service Research Bureau'.

The SOE was in fact an amalgamation of 'Department EH', which was a propaganda organisation of the Foreign Office, and which came under the control of Sir Campbell Stuart, a Canadian newspaper owner; Section D of the Secret Intelligence Service, also known as MI6, and a department of the War Office known as MI(R).

In March 1943, some 18 months after British Commandos had failed in their attempt to capture or kill Rommel at Beda Littoria, the SOE decided that it was their turn to have a go. Why they believed they could be any more successful is unclear, but agents from the SOE came up with a plan to assassinate Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the 'Desert Fox' whose tactical genius threatened to defeat the allies in North Africa.

As was the case with Keyes and his men, the agents from the SOE who came up with the idea believed that it would work, they must have done, because it was them who would have to ultimately locate Rommel's headquarters and carry out the operation to assassinate him.

An un-named agent of the SOE had received intelligence from a known source as to the exact location of where Rommel could be found – in Tunis, Tunisia. The plan was for four SOE members, disguised as Arabs, to attack Rommel's headquarters and kill him. It sounds quite simple when put like that, but sadly it was never going to work. It was certainly well intended and had been put forward with the determined passion that would be expected of such operatives, but sometimes a passionate approach does not always mean it is a realistic one.

The plan, known as Project Doctor, was put to those in command at Brandon, which was the codename for the SOE's secret headquarters in North Africa, who initially thought the idea was to capture valuable documents in a raid 'which might or might not include the capture or killing of Rommel'. But the plan was not fully supported by everybody in SOE, with some of the agents being quite vocal with their views and making it clear that they disapproved of the plot.

'Apart from moral considerations, in view of the waning state of Axis fortunes in north Africa, and from possible retaliation on General Alexander, the British commander in North Africa, Brandon felt that the information provided was so inadequate that to base a plan upon it would merely be the murder of the four agents concerned', an SOE document records.

General Sir Harold Alexander had already refused to give his consent to the plot 'at all events until more detailed information became available'. The plan was abandoned after Rommel moved his HQ before Tunisia fell to

the allies in May 1943. It was just as well that the plan was not approved, because by early 1943, the British were quite clearly gaining the upper hand in North Africa, and as the Afrika Korps' fortunes began to wane, Rommel was flown out of North Africa on 9 March 1943.

An article about a plot to assassinate Rommel appeared in the *Liverpool Echo* dated Wednesday, 27 October 1999. This was fifty-five years after Rommel's death, showing that all those years later there was still universal interest in him and his wartime exploits.

British Plotted Rommel Murder

The British planned to assassinate Rommel, the commander of German forces in Africa during World War Two. The plans contained in wartime files have just been unveiled for the first time.

The decision was made at the end of March 1943, when the Allied forces in Algiers received information pinpointing Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's secret headquarters. Four agents were to attack Rommel at his headquarters near the sea and thought to be vulnerable in an operation code named The Doctor Project.

The agents were from the Special Operations Executive, an organisation set up to carry out sabotage and attacks behind enemy lines. But the plan was abandoned when the information was later viewed as 'so inadequate that to base a plan upon it would merely be the murder of four agents'.

'Moral considerations in view of the waning state of Axis (enemy) fortunes in North Africa and possible retaliation', were also significant in the decision to veto the plan.

There are different theories as to why Rommel left North Africa when he did. One of them is that the Germans realised that their defeat in North Africa was simply a case of when and not if, and didn't want their 'poster boy' Rommel connected to a defeat, or even worst still, captured by the allies.

Rommel and his men had broken American resolve at the Kasserine Pass on the evening of 20 February 1943, before pushing on to Thala where they came up against a heavy British presence. On 22 February, Rommel, having

appraised the situation in which he and his men found themselves, gave the order to cease the attack on Thala and withdraw.

SOE in London also drew up a plot to assassinate Hitler – codename Operation Foxley – at his Bavarian alpine retreat at Berchtesgaden. That was abandoned after opposition from military chiefs who argued that Hitler had proved to be a disastrous commander-in-chief and that his assassination might motivate, rather than demoralise, the German armed forces.

However, SOE agents on instruction from London did carry out one significant assassination, that of Reinhard Heydrich, Hitler's Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia. He wasn't assassinated because of any military capabilities that he might possess, which he didn't, he was nothing more than a murderous bully in a uniform. He was targeted for two reasons. Firstly, because Heydrich's 'brave and heroic' way of fighting a war was to terrorise the local civilian population, and secondly to send out an unequivocal message to the Nazi hierarchy that no matter where they were, or where they were hiding, the Allies could get to them at will.

Chapter Five

Strafing of Rommel's Staff Car – 17 July 1944

During the Second World War the Chateau at La Roche-Guyon, some 40 miles north of Paris, was the headquarters of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and his Army Group B. Such was its administrative needs that the number of officers and men required to work there was somewhere in the region of a thousand.

Rommel had a busy day ahead of him on 17 July 1944. He left his office early that morning as he had to squeeze in visits to inspect the troops of the 276th and 277th Infantry Divisions, before attending a meeting with Lieutenant General Josef Dietrich and Major General Willi Bittrich, who were in charge of the 1st and 2nd SS Panzer Corps. His meeting finished at 4pm and soon after that he began his journey back to his headquarters at La Roche-Guyon, where he had a further meeting planned at 8pm with Joachim von Ribbentrop, Nazi Germany's Foreign Minister.

Accompanying Rommel on his journey were his driver, Sergeant Karl Daniel, Captain Helmuth Lang, Major Neuhaus and Sergeant Holke. As far as the troop inspections went, they were a regular occurrence and were intended more as a morale booster for front line troops. Rommel sat in the front next to Sergeant Daniel with the other three men all in the rear of the vehicle. It was not an enjoyable drive as all of them knew that they were potentially a target for any Allied aircraft flying overhead. Although each of the men tried to be matter of fact about the situation, it was always going to be a difficult journey.

Sergeant Daniel drove as fast and as safely as he could along the narrow roads of the French countryside, praying that he wasn't going to become the target of an Allied aircraft on the lookout for such a target as the staff car he was driving. He had safely made his way through the towns of Falaise and St. Pierre-sur-Dives, and was fast approaching Livarot, when a number of Allied aircraft were spotted in the skies above, forcing Sergeant Daniel to take evasive action and an alternative and safer route in a southerly direction. Fortunately for them this took them down a road that was covered by a line of trees on both sides. The benefit of hindsight is a wonderful thing, and the more sensible thing would have been to stop the car and simply wait for the Allied aircraft to leave the area, but instead Sergeant Daniel, who was no doubt under orders from Rommel, continued to drive. This decision led to their downfall. Soon after their vehicle was no longer concealed by the canopy of trees, it came under attack.

Sergeant Daniel was hit in the left shoulder and left arm by a cannon shell and lost control of the car. The car swerved into a tree stump on the side of the road and landed in a ditch on the right side of the road, Rommel was looking backwards holding on to the door, and was thrown from the car as it turned over. Rommel suffered a severe head injury that left him immediately unconscious, and he had deep gashes from the shattered glass. Rommel lay helpless 20 yards behind where the car had finally come to rest. Captain Lang had jumped out of the rear door as soon as the attack began. Major Neuhaus suffered a pelvis fracture from shell fragments that hit the holster of his revolver and Sergeant Holke was not injured. After a second strafing pass, Captain Lang and Sergeant Holke ran from shelter to carry Rommel to a small cottage on the side of the road. It was the home of farmer Remy Miche.[1]

It was a minor miracle that nobody in the car was killed, and even more of a surprise that both Captain Lang and Sergeant Holke, other than having the wind knocked out of them, escaped totally unscathed.

Of the five men in the car at the time of the attack the most seriously injured was Rommel. Lang and Holke now found themselves in the

unenviable position of having to make sure that they not only kept Rommel safe, but urgently get him medical treatment. Because of his wounds, and Rommel's physical appearance, especially around his head and face, it was obvious to Lang and Holke that he would not survive for much longer without medical attention. The major concern amongst his numerous injuries was a clear and obvious impact wound to a section of his skull. The depression was enough to suggest that he might in fact already be dead.

Lang took control of the situation, as would be expected of an officer and left Holke in charge of Rommel and Major Neuhaus, while he went to get help. Forty-five minutes later he returned with a car. Besides the genuine concern for Rommel, Sergeant Daniel had also been shot up pretty badly as well and was also in urgent need of medical treatment. Holke helped Captain Lang get Rommel and Daniel into the car and then drove them to the nearby town of Livarot. They were taken to a home for the elderly where he was seen and treated by the local pharmacist, the only person with medical knowledge available. Rommel was found to have a fractured skull, a weak pulse and was still in a comatose state. It was by no means certain that he would survive.

The pharmacist had done all he could for Rommel and Daniel, but he knew that the two men required further medical treatment, which he could not provide for them with the limited equipment and medicines at his disposal.

Just twenty-five miles away in Bernay was a German Luftwaffe medical facility, but its distance didn't really matter, because if Captain Lang and Sergeant Holke didn't at least try, then Rommel and Sergeant Daniel were already dead. Despite efforts to save his life, Sergeant Daniel died of his injuries later that same evening. Having been hit by machine gun fire from the attacking aircraft, it is a miracle that he was still alive in the immediate aftermath of the attack.

For Rommel, only the best was good enough, which on this occasion came in the form of the renowned neurological consultant surgeon, Professor A. Esch, who was based in Paris. Although Rommel had a severe fracture of his skull, it was not depressed. One of the major concerns with his condition had been the realisation that he had sustained a leakage of

cerebrospinal fluid. Visually, he looked awful. His face was battered and bruised, and his injuries were more in keeping with him having been badly beaten up in a fight, especially with his left eye being swollen and closed.

Rommel remained at Bernay until 23 July 1944, three days after the assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler, after which he was transferred to L'hopital du Vésinet, on the outskirts of Paris. To get him there meant him having to be driven a distance of more than 100 miles, but this was wartime France. The route would have seen a number of the roads having sustained bomb damage from Allied air attacks, so it would not have been an easy journey. He had suffered a fractured skull, and for that to properly heal and repair itself would have required rest, peace and quiet, and not too much in the way of movement. The driver of the car taking him to Paris had to drive slowly and carefully so as not to cause any unnecessary jarring of Rommel's injuries. Any occasions of him bouncing about on the back seat of the car would not have helped in the recovery of his injuries. As it was the entire journey took more than four hours to complete.

The Nazi authorities never made Rommel's accident known to the German public, which from an historical perspective has caused much debate as to why. The obvious reason would be so as not to negatively affect the morale of both Germany's troops and the civilian population as a whole. By the time of the attack on Rommel's staff car, the Allied armies of both the United States and the British Commonwealth had been landing on the beaches of Normandy for nearly six weeks. As the Allies started to make inroads into Nazi occupied Europe, it is clear that any announcement of Rommel having been severely wounded would not only have been bad for morale, but a possible inspiration for the Allied armies.

But was there another reason why Adolf Hitler decided not to make public the Allied attack on Rommel? There is of course the possibility that Hitler wanted somebody to blame for Germany's worsening military situation in France. If that was the case, and Rommel was the one whom Hitler had determined he was going to pin the blame on, making Rommel's injuries common knowledge certainly would not have played to that plan.

The other possibility here is that Rommel's support for the 20 July assassination plot was already known by the Gestapo, and they were simply

biding their time, or making up their minds about how best to deal with the situation.

Did the injuries he sustained prevent him from being personally involved in the 20 July plot? If he had been well enough and declared his support for the attempt on Hitler's life, maybe others would have held their nerve knowing that someone of his calibre and standing would be the person more than likely to have succeeded Hitler, and take Germany in a totally different direction. It is not beyond the realms of impossibility that if Rommel had become the Führer of Germany in July 1944, the war could have ended sooner and on much more favourable terms for them, with hundreds of thousands fewer deaths, German losses, and lives saved in the Holocaust and of Allied military personnel.

The question remains as to why Rommel was forced to commit suicide. Was it because the Nazis had discovered his alleged involvement in the 20 July Plot to assassinate Hitler, or was it because they had become aware of his desire, in cahoots with his Chief of Staff, General Hans Speidel, to overthrow Hitler and his Nazi regime, or was it a combination of both?

Although no official documentation has ever been discovered where Rommel admitted any involvement or support for the attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler on 20 July 1944, it is widely believed that it happened with his blessing. As most of those who were involved in the planning and execution of the attempt on Hitler's life did not survive the war, there remains limited hard evidence to prove his stand, certainly to a degree that would be needed in a civil courtroom today.

An interesting story in relation to this conundrum comes from the lips of General Heinrich Eberbach, who had served in the First World War, where he was wounded twice and captured by French forces in September 1915, spending the rest of the conflict as a prisoner of war. Returning to Germany after the war he was finally demobbed in 1920. He re-joined the German Army in 1935, and served with distinction throughout the Second World War, seeing action during the invasion of Poland, the Battle of France, the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Battle of Moscow, and the Battle of Stalingrad during which he was wounded in late November 1942 and evacuated back to Germany for medical treatment, where he remained in

hospital until February 1943. By November 1943, he was back in the Soviet Union fighting and leading his troops.

By the time of the Allied invasion of German - occupied Europe in June 1944 in Normandy, Eberbach, as the General der Panzertruppe, was one of the German defenders of the British allocated beaches of 'Juno' and 'Sword'. On 5 July, he was given command of Panzer Group West, but by early August what was left of this force became Panzergruppe Eberbach. Soon after this he was ordered, against his better judgement, to undertake a counter-attack against Allied forces who had managed to break out of Normandy. His instinct was proved to be right as the counter-attack was a total failure. The outcome of this was the encirclement and destruction of the German Seventh Army, the Fifth Panzer Army and the German Army Group B. Eberbach managed to escape and found himself in command of what was left of the Seventh Army, but on 31 August 1944, and after just ten days in charge, he was captured by British troops in the city of Amiens in northern France, and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner of the British.

On his arrival in England he was sent to Trent Park, which at the beginning of the Second World War had been requisitioned by the British government, ostensibly for use as a prisoner of war camp for German officers, which it was. But its main purpose was to extract useful information from prisoners which had an intelligence value. Each of the German officers held at Trent Park had their own room, in keeping with their military rank. What they did not know or realise is that the comfort they were kept in was but a smoke screen, because each of their rooms had been fitted out with hidden microphones, allowing the British to hear and record every word they were saying. By the end of the war a total of eighty-four generals had been held there.

Whilst held there Eberbach spoke with his son, German naval commander Oberleutnant Heinz-Eugen Eberbach, who had been captured on 27 August 1944. He had been the commanding officer of the German submarine U-230 which he had scuttled on 21 August after she ran aground in the Toulon Roads. During the conversation he confided in his son that Rommel had explicitly said to him, 'Hitler and his close associates had to

be killed because this would be the only way out for Germany.' The conversation between the father and son took place in September 1944.

In 2018 German historian Christian Schweizer discovered the wartime papers of Rudolph Hartmann, who during the Second World War had been a banker and a reserve officer in the German Army. These papers also revealed that he was heavily involved in the German Army's resistance movement that was determined to rid the country of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party.

On 15 May 1944 a meeting took place at Hartmann's home in Mareil-Marly, which included many of the military's resistance group. This included von Stülpnagel, Speidel, Kobmann, Finckh, von Hofacker and Hartmann. Rommel was also at this meeting and gave his approval and support for an assassination attempt to go ahead against Hitler. What is even more remarkable about this meeting is that amongst Hartmann's papers was a photograph of that meeting, which clearly shows Hartmann in uniform, Speidel, von Stülpnagel and sitting centre stage is Erwin Rommel.

On the balance of probabilities, Rommel definitely knew of the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler on 20 July. But two points of interest stand out: firstly, that he only appears to have become involved with the conspirators in the early part of 1944. Secondly, if, as it strongly appears, he was involved or supportive of the 20 July Plot, did it not cross his mind that when Generals Burgdorf and Maisel came knocking on his door on 14 October 1944, it might have had something to do with the assassination attempt on Hitler's life rather than just a visit to discuss his next command?

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1. *Neurosurgical Focus* Volume 41 • July 2016

Chapter Six

20 July Plot – 1944

This chapter confirms just how important Rommel was not only to the German war machine but to the morale of the German people as a whole.

Amongst the individuals named below are a number of high ranking military personnel, dignitaries, and politicians along with a few well-to-do members of German society. For every one of them, their rank, position in society or reputation counted for nothing once they had been implicated as a co-conspirator. The vast majority were put before a People's Court or Volksgerichtshof, found guilty and executed the same day inside Plötzensee Prison in Berlin. Most of these 'hearings' lasted less than an hour and were no more than show trials or 'kangaroo courts'. None of the defendants' legal representatives, if they had any, were allowed to speak for them, and the President of the Court, who between 1942 and 1945 was Roland Freisler, acted as the prosecutor. He would both vilify and denounce the defendants, before announcing his verdict and deciding what sentence should be imposed. In most cases it was the death penalty, which for most meant hanging.

When appearing in court members or ex-members of the military were not allowed to wear their uniforms; many were made to wear ill-fitting clothes with no belts or braces to hold up their trousers, and not even a tie. Their dignity was taken away from them completely, they were castigated and humiliated by Freisler.

Rommel was such a stellar personality that he was not made to endure the same fate as everyone else involved or implicated in the 20 July plot. What happened to them and how their lives ended was of no real concern to the Nazis, but Rommel was a totally different case, because how he died

would not only reflect on Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, but would have far-reaching consequences for Germany as a whole.

In relation to the 20 July Plot, the assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler's life, it is estimated that some 7,000 people were arrested in the immediate aftermath of the incident by members of Hitler's SS and Gestapo. Of these some 4,980 were put before Roland Freisler's People's Court, found guilty and executed. Here are just some of those individuals:

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Bernadis was arrested the same evening of the failed plot to kill Hitler. His role was to send the order which began Operation Valkyrie. He did this unaware that the bomb had not killed Hitler in the meeting at the Wolf 's Lair. He was tried by the People's Court and executed on 8 August 1944.

Albrecht Graf von Bernstorff was part of the Kreisau Circle and helped connect resistance workers with other groups that might be helpful to their cause. He had previously worked at the German Embassy in London for ten years between 1923 and 1933, but as an ardent anti-Nazi, his career in the civil service came to an abrupt end when the Nazis came to power. In 1940, he was held at Dachau concentration camp for a few months by the Nazis because of his views about them. In July 1943, he was once again arrested by the Gestapo and held at their headquarters in Berlin. In February 1944, he was transferred to the Ravensbrück concentration camp, before ending up at the Lehrter Strasse Prison, where he was eventually executed by firing squad on 22 April 1945.

General Ludwig Beck met his death on 20 July 1944, the same day as the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler took place. He tried to commit suicide by shooting himself in the head, but only succeeded in severely wounding himself. He was then shot in the back of the head on the orders of General Friedrich Fromm, whose custody he was in at the time.

Major Count Hans-Jurgen von Blumenthal was executed by hanging on 13 October 1944, the day before Rommel committed suicide. On the day of his death he wrote a final letter to his wife, which he signed with the name, 'Peter'.

Lieutenant Colonel Hasso von Boehmer was tried by the People's Court on 5 March 1945, where he was found guilty and sentenced to death.

He was hanged the same day at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Eugen Bolz had previously held the position of State President of Württemberg. He was due to become the Culture Minister in the new government after Hitler's death. This meant that he would be replacing Paul Joseph Goebbels, who was also the Reich Minister of Propaganda. Bolz was beheaded at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin on 23 January 1944.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian and Lutheran Pastor. He was hanged at Flossenbürg concentration camp on 9 April 1945. Just two weeks later the camp was liberated by men of the United States 90th and 97th Infantry Divisions. Bonhoeffer's brother, Klaus, and his brother-in-law Schleicher, were also executed, on the night of 22/23 April 1945. Another brother-in-law, Hans von Dohananyi, who was also implicated in the plot against Hitler, was executed on 9 April 1945 at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Dr Eduard Robert Wolfgang Brucklmeir, a German diplomat, was hanged on 20 October 1944.

Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, who was the Chief of German Military Intelligence was hanged at Flossenbürg concentration camp on 9 April 1945. His was a strange case which showed just how paranoid Hitler had become in the immediate aftermath of the attempt on his life. Canaris' only known crime in relation to the attempt on Hitler's life was that he knew and associated with many of those involved in the conspiracy against him. No one who had been tortured or interrogated by the Gestapo or SS had mentioned Canaris' name. There was not a single shred of evidence found linking him to the plot.

Major General Heinrich Graf zu Dohna-Schlobitten, the Chief of the Acting General Command was hanged on 14 September 1944. He had served in the German Army during the First World War. He was tried at the People's Court in front of Roland Fischer on 14 September 1944 and executed later the same day at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Hans von Dohnanyi was a court official. Although initially arrested on 5 April 1943 on charges of foreign currency violations by the Gestapo, his part in the plot to kill Hitler on 20 July 1944 only came to light after the

failed attempt. He was executed on either 8 or 9 April 1945 at Sachsenhausen concentration camp by being hanged with piano wire.

General Erich Fellgiebel was the Chief of Military Signals. His part in the 20 July assassination attempt on Hitler's life was to cut off all communications throughout Germany. He was arrested the same day as the failed assassination attempt, interrogated and tortured for three weeks by the Gestapo, but did not give up the names of a single one of his co-conspirators. He was hanged at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin on 4 September 1944.

Colonel Eberhard Finckh was the Chief Quartermaster to Gunther Blumentritt. His job in the 20 July Plot was to arrest senior members of the Gestapo, SS and SD in Paris, after confirmation had been received that Hitler was dead. He was tried before the People's Court in Berlin on 30 August 1944, found guilty, sentenced to death and hanged that same afternoon at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Reinhold Frank was a lawyer who supported the resistance group. He was arrested the day after the failed attempt on Hitler's life, tried before the People's Court on 12 January 1945, found guilty of treason and high treason, and sentenced to death. He was hanged on 23 January 1945 at Plötzensee Prison.

Colonel Wessel Freytag von Loringhoven, who was part of the High Command of the German Armed Forces, was the man who provided the detonator charges and the explosives for the assassination attempt on Hitler's life. He had acquired it from German intelligence, who had quantities of it that they had captured from the British. This not only made it more difficult to trace its origins, but it also made it look like the British were in fact the ones responsible for the assassination attempt, which in turn then gave the conspirators time to either escape, or try again. Just before he was to be arrested by the Gestapo and aware of their intelligence techniques, Loringhoven committed suicide at Mauerwald in East Prussia.

The case of **Colonel General Friedrich Fromm** was a strange one in that Fromm 'played' both sides and still ended up losing his life. His Chief of Staff was Claus von Stauffenberg. At some unknown date he became aware of the assassination attempt on Hitler's life. Although he did not

become involved in the plot, he kept quiet about what he knew on the understanding that once the assassination had been carried out, he would be given a position in Germany's new government. Once he heard the attempt on Hitler's life had failed he panicked and tried to arrest von Stauffenberg and other conspirators but instead was detained by them at the Berlin headquarters of the Replacement Army. Once the coup attempt had finally collapsed Fromm was released, and almost immediately had von Stauffenberg put before a firing squad and shot, even though Hitler had given specific orders for all those involved in the plot against his life to be detained so that they could be interrogated by the Gestapo. Eventually Fromm was the one arrested by the Gestapo, and despite no connection between him and the conspirators could be found, he was eventually charged and convicted of cowardice before the enemy. On 12 March 1945, he was executed by firing squad at the Brandenburg-Görden Prison.

Captain Ludwig Gehre, by the beginning of the Second World War, was serving with German Military Intelligence, or the Abwehr. This brought him into contact with a number of conspirators who had set out to rid their country of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. In March 1944, Gehre was arrested by the Gestapo in relation to an earlier attempt on Hitler's life which had been organised by Henning von Tresckow, an officer in the German Army. Miraculously he managed to escape and disappeared into the confusion that went with a war - torn Germany. On 2 November 1944, when he realised that he was about to be discovered by the Gestapo, he shot his wife dead before turning the gun on himself. Although badly wounded, he survived. By February 1945 he had recovered sufficiently to be sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. Two months later on 5 April 1945, he was sent to Flossenbürg Concentration camp in Bavaria, where he was hanged four days later.

Erich Gloeden was executed on 30 November 1944 at Plötzensee Prison, along with his wife, Elizabeth, her mother, Elizabeth Kuznitzky, Carl Marks and Hans Sierks. All five of them were guillotined. None of them had played any part in the assassination attempt on Hitler's life in the failed 20 July plot. Their crime was to shelter one of the plotters, General Fritz Lindemann.

Fritz Lindemann was a general in the German Army and the Chief of Staff of the Artillery. His role in the anti-Nazi movement was that in the event of the successful assassination of Adolf Hitler, Lindemann was to make an announcement about what had happened over the radio to the German people. An unknown individual betrayed Fritz Lindemann and the five 'Good Samaritan' relatives in Dresden who hid him and also helped persecuted Jews. Lindemann was shot and seriously wounded during his arrest by the Gestapo in September 1944. He died in hospital days later. The Nazis would have done all they could to have kept him alive, so they could have put him on trial then execute him. After standing trial for helping him at the Nazi People's Court, Erich and Elisabeth Gloeden, Elisabeth Kuznitzky, Hans Sierks and Carl Marks were sentenced to death and executed by guillotine at Plötzensee Prison in November 1944.

Dr Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, the Mayor of Leipzig, was arrested on 12 August 1944, and executed by hanging on 2 February 1945. If the plot to assassinate Hitler had succeeded, Goerdeler was to have become the new Chancellor of Germany. Although he was against the Nazi Party, he was no match for the interrogation techniques of the dreaded Gestapo, and gave up a large number of names of his co-conspirators, which led to arrests and executions.

Nikolaus Gross was a journalist who produced an anti-Nazi underground newspaper. He also became involved with resistance activities. He was arrested on 12 August 1944 in relation to a failed attempt at killing Hitler at his 'Wolf 's Lair' headquarters in Bavaria. He was hanged on 23 January 1945, at Plötzensee prison in Berlin, where his wife reported that he had been tortured on his arms and hand. His farewell letter to his wife was written moments before he died. As a member of the Roman Catholic Church, Gross was beatified by Pope John Paul in 2001

Karl Ludwig Freiherr von und zu Guttenberg worked in counter intelligence at Germany's Foreign Affairs Office overseen by Admiral Canaris. He was arrested soon after the failed plot of 20 July, interrogated and tortured, but gave up no names of any of his co-conspirators. As the war was drawing to a close and the Allies were closing in on Berlin,

Guttenberg was killed by orders of Heinrich Müller, the chief of the Gestapo, on the evening of 23/24 April 1945.

Hans Bernd von Haeften was the brother of Theodor von Haeften and a member of the German Resistance who wanted to rid Germany of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. He was arrested on 23 July and 'tried' before the People's Court on 15 August, where he was found guilty and sentenced to death. Charged with the offence of treason he pleaded guilty, saying, 'Legally speaking it is not treason.'

Werner Karl Otto Theodor von Haeften was an Oberleutnant in the Wehrmacht, and adjutant to von Stauffenberg. On 20 July 1944 the two men arrived at the Wolf 's Lair in Rastenburg where von Stauffenberg planted the bomb intending to kill Hitler. He was executed later the same day in Berlin.

Albrecht von Hagen was the man who supplied the explosives for the bomb that von Stauffenberg left under the table at the Wolf 's Lair. He was quickly arrested and on 8 August 1944 he appeared before the People's Court where he was sentenced to death and hanged later the same afternoon at the Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Colonel Georg Hansen was part of Germany's foreign military reconnaissance after Wilhelm Canaris resigned in February 1944. He had become part of the German resistance after he had been asked to do so by Ludwig Beck. After the failed attempt on Hitler's life he was arrested and hanged on 8 September 1944 at Plöetzensee Prison in Berlin.

Baron Ernst von Harnack was accused by the Gestapo of being involved in the 20 July Plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, he was hanged in March 1945 at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin and buried in an unmarked grave.

Theodor Haubach served in the German Army during the First World War as a volunteer where he was wounded on more than one occasion. After the failed attempt on Hitler's life at the Wolf 's Lair on 20 July 1944, Haubach was arrested and sentenced to death by the People's Court. By then he was very ill. He was put to death on 23 January 1945 along with **Helmuth James Graf von Moltke** at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Professor Albrecht-Georg Haushofer was executed on 23 April 1945, along with Klaus Bonhoeffer and Rudiger Schleicher, by being shot in the back of the neck by the Gestapo. His father, Karl Haushofer, had been a friend of Hitler and Hess and had visited them both when they were jailed in 1923 after the failed Beer Hall Putsch in Munich. Haushofer's body was found on 12 May 1945 by his brother.

Lieutenant- General Paul von Hase was arrested by the Gestapo on the evening of 20 July, whilst having dinner with Joseph Goebbels. He was executed by hanging on 8 August 1944, at the Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Ulrich von Hassell was the German Ambassador to Italy. His position in the resistance was to act as the liaison officer between the different factions involved. He was arrested in the aftermath of the failed plot, and executed on 8 September 1944. Hassell had served in the German Army during the First World War.

Major Egbert Hayessen had only been involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler from 15 July 1944, and was due to deal with logistic matters in the immediate aftermath of the coup. He was tried at a People's Court on 15 August 1944, where he was found guilty and hanged later the same day at the Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Wolf-Heinrich Julius Otto Bernhard Fritz Hermann Ferdinand Graf von Helldorf was the Chief of the Berlin Police, and had been involved in the anti-Nazi resistance since 1938. His role in the coup was to prevent the Berlin Police from becoming involved in a post assassination military takeover, and to ensure they assisted the 'new' government. He was hanged at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin on 15 August 1944. Hitler was so angry at his involvement in the plot that he ordered that von Helldorf be made to watch his co-conspirators being hanged, before he faced the same fate.

Major General Otto Herfurth, who was the Chief of Staff of the III Military District which included Berlin, was one of the collaborators in the plot to assassinate Hitler, but when the attempt on his life failed, Herfuth readily betrayed a number of his fellow conspirators. He was arrested on 14 August and after being found guilty at a People's Court, was hanged at Plötzensee Prison on 29 September 1944.

Colonel General Erich Hoepner served in the Luftwaffe. He was one of the conspirators involved in the 20 July plot to assassinate Hitler and is believed to have been one of those who implicated Rommel. He was hanged on 20 December 1944.

Colonel Caesar von Hofacker was another of the co-conspirators who is believed to have implicated Rommel in the 20 July Plot. He was hanged on 20 December 1944.

In the successful aftermath of the coup **Major Roland von Hoesslin**, was to have his men in East Prussia occupy important government buildings. He was arrested by the Gestapo on 23 August 1944, before being dishonourably discharged from the German Army on 14 September 1944. He was hanged at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin on the afternoon of 13 October 1944.

Otto Hubener, an insurance broker and one of the conspirators in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, was hanged in April 1944.

Colonel Friedrich Gustav Jaeger was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement and the commander of the Panzer reserve in two locations in Poland. His part in the plot to assassinate Hitler was to have his men arrest Joseph Goebbels once confirmation of Hitler's death had been received. Instead, once it became clear that the plot had failed, he was arrested by his own men. He was hanged at Plötzensee Prison on 21 August 1944.

Hans John had begun the war as an officer in the German Army but was wounded in fighting on the Eastern Front in 1940, medically discharged and allowed to return to his job as a lawyer. He was involved in the plot to murder Hitler on 20 July 1944. He was arrested in August 1944, for his part in the plot and was executed by firing squad in April 1945.

Hermann Kaiser, a teacher from Wiesbaden, was one of those convicted of having been involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler. He was executed by hanging on 23 January 1945.

Otto Kiep, Chief of the Reich Press office, was arrested for being one of the co-conspirators in the attempt to assassinate Hitler. Having been found guilty at a People's Court hearing on 26 August 1944, he was hanged later the same afternoon at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Lieutenant Colonel Bernhard Klamroth was executed on 15 August 1944, for his part in the failed attempt on Hitler's life on 20 April 1944. His father-in-law, Johannes 'Hans' Georg Klamroth, was aware of the plot but did nothing about it and for this he was found guilty at a People's Court hearing on 26 August 1944. He was sentenced to death and hanged the same day at Plötzensee Prison.

Ewald Albert Friedrich Karl Lepold Arnold von Kleist-Schmenzin was a lawyer and politician. He was against Nazism and had been in contact with the British since 1938 in an attempt at getting them to stand up to Hitler and not to appease him. He was arrested on 21 April 1944 for his part in the 20 July plot. He was tried and found guilty at his trial before a People's Court on 23 February and hanged on 9 April 1945 in Berlin.

Gunther von Kluge was aware of the plot to kill Hitler but was not involved in it. In the aftermath of the failed attempt he was invited to a meeting in Berlin with Hitler, and on fearing the worse, he committed suicide on 19 August 1944.

Dr Hans Koch was a German lawyer and a member of the anti-Nazi Resistance movement. In a post-Hitler Germany, Koch was due to become the presiding judge. He was shot dead in Berlin by a member of the Sonderkommando of the SS on 24 April 1945.

Alfred Kransfelder was a lieutenant colonel in the German Navy and a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. His main contribution was to try and find other members of the Navy who were prepared to join the resistance. He was arrested on 24 July 1944 and hanged on 10 August at Plötzensee Prison after having been found guilty at a People's Court.

Carl Langbehn was a German Lawyer and a member of the anti-Nazi resistance. In September 1943, he covertly met with the American, Allen Welsh Dulles in Switzerland. At the time Dulles worked for the Office of Strategic Services, and went on to become the head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). After his return he was arrested by the Gestapo, put before a People's Court and hanged on 12 October 1944 in Berlin.

Dr Julius Leber was a German politician and a member of the resistance movement against Nazism. He had served Germany during the First World War, and was wounded twice. Leber had no great love for the Nazis. Soon

after they came to power in 1933 there was an attempt on his life. When that failed he was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp on the charge of being a 'dangerous opponent of the regime' where he was held until 1937. On 5 July 1944 he was arrested by the Gestapo after he had been betrayed by a member of the Communist Party. He was tried before a People's Court on 20 October 1944 and hanged at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin on 5 January 1945.

Heinrich Graf von Lehndorff-Steinort was an East Prussian aristocrat and land owner, who was also one of those involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler at the Wolf 's Lair on 20 July 1944. He was arrested on 21 July, tried and found guilty on 4 September and hanged in Berlin later the same day. His wife and four daughters spent the remainder of the war detained in concentration camps. Each of them survived the war.

Dr Paul Lejeune-Jung was a businessman, economist and politician, and also a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. During the war members of the resistance had held meetings at his home. He was arrested by the Gestapo on 11 August 1944 and after a court appearance which began on 7 September and finished on 8 September he was found guilty of treason, high-treason, along with defeatism and supporting the enemy. He was hanged later the same day.

Major Ludwig Freiherr von Leonrod had been badly wounded on the Eastern Front in 1941, which saw the end of his war as a fighting soldier. He only discovered details of an intended coup in December 1943. He was arrested by the Gestapo the day after the failed assassination attempt on Hitler's life and hanged at Plötzensee Prison on 26 August 1944, after having been found guilty of involvement in the 20 July Plot before a People's Court on 21 August.

Bernhard Letterhaus was a Trade Unionist and a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. If the attempt on Hitler's life had been successful, he was ear-marked to become the Reconstruction Minister in the new German Government. He was executed by hanging on 14 November 1944 at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Wilhelm Leuschner was the Minister for Internal Affairs of Hesse. He served in the German Army during the First World War, afterwards

becoming involved in politics. He was arrested by the Nazis twice in 1934, during their clampdown on unions and held at a number of locations including a concentration camp at Lichtenburg. He later became involved in the anti-Nazi resistance movement. He was arrested on 16 August 1944, tried before a hearing of the People's Court and hanged at Plötzensee Prison on 29 September 1944.

Colonel Otfield von Linstow only became aware of the plans to kill Hitler on 20 July 1944, the actual day of the failed assassination attempt. He was arrested in Paris on 23 July 1944 and was executed by hanging on 30 August.

Ferdinand Joseph Meinolph Anton Maria Freiherr von Lüninck was involved in the anti-Nazi movement's plans to overthrow Adolf Hitler, and in a new government was going to have been the Political Commissioner for Defence District II, or Danzig, which today is Gdansk in Poland. He was arrested on 25 July 1944, tried, found guilty for his involvement in the 20 July Plot, and hanged at Plötzensee Prison on 14 November 1944.

Hermann Maas was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. He had served in the German Army during the First World War and was wounded when he was gassed in 1918. On 8 August 1944 he was arrested and incarcerated at Ravensbrück concentration camp and executed on 20 October 1944, by hanging at Plötzensee Prison. His wife died of pneumonia five weeks later, leaving their six children orphaned.

Colonel Rudolf Graf von Marogna-Redwitz was a Wehrmacht officer and an active member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. He was arrested by the Gestapo soon after the failed assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler. He was hanged at Plötzensee Prison on 12 October 1944.

Michael Graf von Matuschka served in the German Army during the First World War. He was wounded in 1915 before being captured by the Russians and spending nearly three years as a prisoner of war. After the fighting had finally finished he turned to politics. He later became involved with the anti-Nazi resistance movement. He was arrested by the Gestapo soon after the failed attempt on Hitler's life and was hanged at Plötzensee Prison on 14 September 1944.

Colonel Joachim Meichssner was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. In September 1943, attempts were made by Colonel Helmuth Stieff to convince Meichssner to kill Hitler in a suicide attack, which he eventually refused to do. He was arrested on 28 July 1944 by the Gestapo after having possibly being implicated by his father, who had been arrested a week earlier. He was executed by hanging at Plötzensee Prison on 29 September 1944.

Colonel Albrecht Ritter Mertz von Quirnheim had been good friends with von Stauffenberg since 1925. As a nationalist, he had initially been a supporter of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, but once he saw what they really stood for, he began to distance himself from them. Involved in plotting to kill Hitler since September 1943, he took part in the planning of Operation Valkyrie, an emergency contingency of government, to be implemented in the immediate aftermath of Hitler's death on 20 July 1944. Later the same day, von Quirnheim was arrested by Colonel General Friedrich Fromm and shot by firing squad in Berlin, along with von Stauffenberg, Olbricht and Werner von Haeften.

Between 1944 and 1945, **Arthur Nebe** was the commanding officer of Einsatzgruppe B. For his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler on 20 July, he was executed at Plötzensee Prison on 21 March 1945. But his was no ordinary death: he was hanged with piano wire from a meat hook on the orders of Adolf Hitler. His role in the plot after it had been confirmed that Hitler was dead, was to kill Himmler. He went into hiding but was betrayed by an ex-mistress in January 1945.

Wilhelm zur Nieden, a local government officer, was shot by the Gestapo on 23 April 1945.

Major Hans-Ulrich von Oertzen was involved in the planning of the 20 July plot. He was initially interrogated by two senior German Army officers, but he made no admissions and no damning evidence against him was discovered. The following day a secretary recognised him as someone she had seen in a meeting with von Stauffenberg. Once this information became known the Gestapo were called to deal with him, but before he could be handed over to them he committed suicide by detonating two hand grenades.

General Friedrich Olbricht was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. He was arrested in the immediate aftermath of the failed attempt on Hitler's life, and was executed by firing squad on the orders of Colonel General Fromm, who was also involved in the plot and, by having Olbricht executed, was trying to cover his tracks.

Major General Hans Oster was a leading figure in the anti-Nazi resistance movement, as well as an officer in the Abwehr, German military intelligence. He had been arrested in 1943 because it was believed that he was helping other German officers who had been caught helping Jews to escape. His part in the resistance movement was discovered when the Gestapo read about it in the diaries of Admiral Canaris who was hanged alongside him. He was executed at Flossenbürg concentration camp on 9 April 1945.

Erwin Planck was a German politician and during the First World War he had been an officer in the German Army. After being captured by the French, he became a prisoner of war between 1914 and 1917. He was no lover of the Nazi Party. A good friend of his and fellow First World War German officer was Major Kurt von Schleicher, who after the war became the head of the political department in the newly formed Ministry of the Reichswehr. On the night of 30 June 1934, the Night of the Long Knifes, von Schleicher and his wife were shot dead at their home in Babelsberg, Potsdam by members of the SS intelligence agency the Sicherheitsdienst or SD. Planck was involved in the planning of the 20 July plot, and was arrested by the Gestapo on 23 July 1944. He was hanged on 23 January 1945 at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Kurt von Plettenberg was a diplomat who represented the Prussian royal family. He committed suicide on 10 March 1945, whilst being held in custody by the Gestapo for having been involved in the preparations for the 20 July plot.

Dr Johannes Popitz was the Prussian Finance Minister and a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. He was arrested by the Gestapo on 21 July 1944, and executed at Plötzensee Prison on 2 February 1945 for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler. In 1943 he had even gone to the lengths of trying to convince Heinrich Himmler that it was time to get rid of Hitler,

and to take part in negotiations with the Allies to agree a peace deal. The fact that Himmler did not have him arrested at that time speaks volumes.

General Friedrich von Rabenau was executed at Flossenbürg concentration camp on 9 April 1945 on the specific orders of Himmler who also instructed that his death was to be reported as the result of a low flying Allied air attack on the camp.

Professor Adolf Reichwein had served in the German Army during the First World War, which for him came to an abrupt end when he was badly wounded. On his return to Germany he continued his studies at university. He became a cultural policy maker, an economist and a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. He was executed on 20 October 1944 at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Colonel Alexis Freiherr von Roenne worked as an intelligence analyst for Hitler. He did not have any involvement in the 20 July Plot, but knew many of those who did. This led to his arrest in the immediate aftermath of the failed attempt on Hitler's life, but he was soon released. On 9 August he was re-arrested, held in custody for two months and then on 5 October 1940, was put before a People's Court which somehow managed to discover his 'involvement' in the plot. He was sentenced to death and hanged from a meat hook at Plötzensee Prison later the same day.

Karl Sack was a Judge Advocate of the German Army who was involved in the planning of the 20 July Plot against Adolf Hitler. If the assassination attempt had been successful, he was earmarked as the Justice Minister in a new government. He was arrested on 9 August 1945 and, after being held in custody for 8 months, was executed at Flossenburg concentration camp by hanging on 9 April 1945.

Lieutenant Colonel Joachim Sadrozinski took an active part in the 20 July Plot and was responsible for transmitting the 'Valkyrie' orders in the Bendleblock, the General Army Office of the Oberkommando des Heeres, and the Abwehr intelligence unit, in the immediate aftermath of the failed assassination attempt. He was arrested by the Gestapo later the same day, before the People's Court on 21 August and executed by hanging at the Plötzensee Prison some five weeks later on 29 September.

Anton Saefkow was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement and a Communist. He had first been arrested by the Nazis when they came to power in 1933 and after being incarcerated in a number of different camps he was finally released in July 1939, and immediately became involved in activism and resistance work. Conspirators of the 20 July Plot had contacted him in the lead-up to the assassination attempt, in the hope that he and his resistance group, the KPD, would become involved. He was arrested in the immediate aftermath of the failed plot, tried before the People's Court on 5 September and executed by guillotine at Brandenburg-Gördon Prison on 18 September.

Professor Rudiger Schleicher was an academic and part of the anti-Nazi resistance movement during the Second World War. In the aftermath of a successful attempt on Hitler's life on 20 July 1944, he was to have become responsible for air travel. Schleicher was arrested by the Gestapo soon after the failed attempt, who shot him along with a number of other prisoners on the night of 22 April 1945 in Berlin.

Ernst Wilhelm Schneppenhorst had been a member of the German Reichstag between 1932 and 1933. He was arrested and imprisoned by the Nazis in 1937 and again in 1939. At the time of the 20 July Plot, Schneppenhorst was imprisoned in the Oranienburg concentration camp, which held those political opponents of the Nazi Party who were from the Berlin area of Germany. Despite the fact that he had no known connection with the 20 July Plot or any of the plotters, he was executed on 24 April 1945.

Lieutenant Colonel Werner Schrader was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement and was involved in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler on 20 July 1944. He had first been arrested by the Nazis in January 1933, having been a vocal critic of the regime for some years. His part in the 20 July Plot was the purchasing of the explosives used to try and kill Hitler at the Wolf 's Lair. After the attempt on Hitler's life failed, Schrader knew it was only a matter of time before the Gestapo came knocking on his door. He committed suicide on 28 July 1944 by shooting himself in the head. It is possible that he did this because he feared that under torture he might reveal names of friends and colleagues who were also involved in the

plot to kill Hitler. Despite the fact that he had committed suicide, Schrader was posthumously expelled from the Army on 4 August 1944 by an Army Court of Honour on the direct orders of Adolf Hitler.

Friedrich Werner Graf von der Schulenberg had served as the last German ambassador to the Soviet Union before operation Barbarossa. He was no great fan of the Nazi Party and after the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler on 20 July 1944, he was arrested on suspicion of being one of the conspirators and charged with treason. He was found guilty and executed at Plötzensee Prison on 10 November 1944.

Fritz-Dietlof Graf von der Schulenberg was born in London in 1902, as at the time his father, Count Friedrich Bernhard von der Schulenburg was Germany's military attaché to the Court of St James's in the capital. Schulenberg was one of the planners of Operation Valkyrie, and in a new German government, he would have held the position of head of the Interior Ministry. He was arrested in the hours immediately following the failed attempt on Hitler's life and was hanged at Plötzensee Prison on 10 August 1944.

Ludwig Schwamb was a civil servant and an open opponent of the Nazi Party. He was arrested by the Gestapo just three days after the failed attempt on Hitler's life and was executed on 23 January 1945, at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Count Ulrich Wilhelm Graf Schwerin Schwanenfeld, a land owner and member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement, was Danish by birth having been born in Copenhagen in 1902. He was arrested on the evening of 21 July 1944, and on 21 August he was tried before the People's Court, found guilty and sentenced to death. He was hanged at the Plötzensee Prison in Berlin on 8 September 1944.

Lieutenant Colonel Gunther Smend was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement, having become concerned that Hitler was leading Germany to defeat. He was arrested on 1 August 1944, tried before a People's Court on 30 August, found guilty, and hanged on 8 September 1944, at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Franz Sperr had served in the German Army during the First World War, after which he became a civil servant, working in the Bavarian Embassy in

Berlin. He later became involved in the Kreisau Circle, which was a group of twenty-five prominent German dissidents who were opposed to Adolf Hitler. The group's name came from the fact that they met at the home of one of their members, Helmuth James Von Moltke, who had an estate in the town of Kreisau. Sperr was arrested by the Gestapo in the immediate aftermath of the failed attempt on Hitler's life. He was hanged at Plötzensee Prison on 23 January 1945 for complicity in the 20 July Plot.

Berthold Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg was a lawyer and elder brother of Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg. In 1939 he became a staff judge in the High Command of the German Navy. His apartment in Berlin was used for many of the meetings of the plotters against Hitler. He was arrested on the evening of the failed assassination attempt, and after having been found guilty of his involvement in it, he was killed later the same day at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin. His death was particularly perverse as he was strangled to the point of passing out on a number of occasions, each time being resuscitated before eventually being hanged, If that wasn't strange enough the proceedings were filmed so that Hitler could re-watch at a later date.

Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg had joined the Army in 1926. Although he had started out being a supporter of Hitler, his attitude towards him appears to have changed after The Night of the Long Knives, when he realised the path he was going down by following a man like Hitler. Although Stauffenberg had racist and nationalistic views he did not care for the manner in which Hitler and the Nazi Party conducted themselves, feeling they were extreme. He had been approached early in the war to become part of the anti-Nazi resistance movement, but had declined. On 7 April 1943, whilst serving with the 10th Panzer Division near the town of Mezzouna in Tunisia, the vehicle he was in was attacked by an aircraft of the Royal Australian Air Force. Badly wounded, he lost his left eye, his right hand and two fingers from his left. He spent three months recuperating in a Munich hospital, eventually returning to and continuing his military career behind a desk. He eventually became actively involved in the plot to kill Hitler sometime in late 1943, and quickly became its driving force. It was he who planted the bomb under the table in the meeting room at the

Wolf ’s Lair on 20 July 1944. He was arrested and executed later the same day by firing squad, on the orders of fellow conspirator, General Friedrich Fromm.

Major General Helmet Steiff had become disillusioned with Hitler and the Nazi Party at the very beginning of the war, after he had seen the conduct of some of the German forces towards the civilian population during the invasion of Poland. He had initially offered to kill Hitler in a suicide attack, but then changed his mind despite attempts by von Stauffenberg to get him to do it. Steiff was arrested by the Gestapo on the night of the failed assassination, and despite several days of torture, did not give up the name of any of his co-conspirators. He was executed by hanging at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Theodor Strunck was a German lawyer and an active member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement with some of the group’s meetings taking place at his home. He was arrested on 1 August 1944 and dishonourably discharged from the Army. He was tried before the People’s Court on 10 October 1944 and hanged at Flossenbürg concentration camp on 9 April 1945.

Colonel General Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement and involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler in the 20 July plot. He was subsequently arrested and brought back to Berlin. During the journey he tried to take his own life by shooting himself in the head, but only succeeded in blinding himself. He was executed by hanging at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin on 30 August 1944 after having been found guilty of treason.

Lieutenant General Fritz Thiele was the communications chief in the German Army and was executed at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin on 4 September 1944. It was his job to cut off communications between officers known to be loyal to Hitler, and German troops who could intervene to put down a coup by the resistance movement in the aftermath of the failed attempt on Hitler’s life. He was arrested by the Gestapo on 11 August 1944 and sentenced to death at a People’s Court on 21 August.

Major Busso Thoma was part of the anti-Nazi resistance movement involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler on 20 July 1944. He was arrested

on 14 September 1944 and executed by hanging at Plötzensee Prison on 23 January 1945.

General Karl Freiherr von Thüngen appears to have had a change of heart in his support for the conspirators of the 20 July Plot, after he found out the assassination attempt on Hitler's life had failed, going as far as helping to interrogate a fellow conspirator under his command. He was executed by firing squad at the Brandenburg-Görden Prison on 24 October 1944.

Major General Henning von Tresckow was one of the major conspirators in the anti-Nazi resistance movement. When he heard the attempt to assassinate Hitler had failed, he was serving on the Eastern Front at Królowy Most, in north-eastern Poland. It was then that knowing what his fate was likely to be he decided to take his own life, in a somewhat dramatic fashion. He decided to try and make his death look nothing like a suicide, but rather an attack by local partisans. To this end on 21 July 1944, he held a grenade under his chin and detonated it. His last words to Fabian von Schlabrendorff, a fellow member of the Nazi resistance, are said to have been:

The whole world will vilify us now, but I am still totally convinced that we did the right thing. Hitler is the arch enemy not only of Germany but the world. When in a few hours' time, I go before God to account for what I have done and left undone, I know I will be able to justify what I did in the struggle against Hitler. God promised Abraham that he would destroy Sodom if only ten righteous men could be found in the city, and so I hope for our sake God will not destroy Germany. No one among us can complain about dying, for whoever joined our ranks put on the shirt of Nessus. A man's moral worth is established only at the point where he is ready to give his life in defence of his convictions.

The reference to the 'shirt of Nessus' is from Greek mythology referring to the poisoned shirt that killed Heracles.

Friedrich Adam von Trott zu Solz had been against Hitler and the Nazi Party from the very beginning. He was an active member of the Kreisau

Circle. In the new government that would have come into power should Hitler have been killed, von Trott zu Solz was due to be appointed as the Secretary of State in the Foreign Office, as well as the lead negotiator with the Allies. He was arrested within days of the failed attempt on Hitler's life and hanged at Plötzensee Prison on 26 August 1944.

Colonel Nikolaus Graf von Üxküll-Gyllenband was the uncle of Claus von Stauffenberg whom he had tried to convince to become part of a coup d'etat against Hitler as early as 1939. He was arrested by the Gestapo on 23 July 1944 and hanged at Plützensee Prison on 14 September 1944, the same day he had been found guilty before a People's Court.

Lieutenant Colonel Hans Alexander von Voss was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. He had been involved in a previous failed attempt at killing Hitler on 13 March 1943, when a bomb was to be planted in an aircraft he was travelling in. His involvement in the 20 July Plot was not discovered for some time, but fearing that he was soon to be arrested by the Gestapo and that he might implicate friends whilst being tortured, he committed suicide on 8 November 1944, at Lake Heinersdorf, about 25 miles east of Berlin.

General Eduard Wagner who was the General Quartermaster of the German Army, supplied a plane for use by von Stauffenberg in the immediate aftermath of the failed plot on Hitler's life. Fearing that his part in the plot would be discovered, and perhaps concerned at what he faced at the hands of the Gestapo, he took his own life on 23 July 1944, by shooting himself in the head.

Hermann Josef Wehrle was a Catholic priest who had served in the German Army during the First World War. In 1938 he was sacked from his position as a teacher at a school in Marktbreit because he would not support the Nazi Party. He was inadvertently implicated in the 20 July Plot by Ludwig Freiherr von Leonrod who told the Gestapo about a confession he had made to Wehrle about the theological justification of tyrannicide. Wehrle was arrested by the Gestapo on 19 August 1944 and tried before a People's Court on 14 September where he was found guilty of having knowledge of the plot to assassinate Hitler. He was hanged the same day at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Carl Wentzel-Teutschenthal was a farmer and agricultural contractor and a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. He was executed at Plötzensee Prison on 20 December 1944, for his part in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

Field Marshal Erwin von Witzleben was the highest ranking German officer actively involved in the attempt to assassinate Hitler in the 20 July Plot. If it had been successful he would have become the Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht. He had served in the Army since 1901. He was arrested at his home on 21 July 1944 and discharged from the Army so that he was no longer subject to German military law. He appeared before the People's Court on 7 August 1944 and was sentenced to death, which was carried out later the same day at Plötzensee Prison. He was another who was hanged with piano wire which was wrapped round a meat hook.

Peter Yorck von Wartenburg was in the innermost circle of the conspirators. He was arrested in Berlin on the evening of 20 July 1944, and executed by hanging at the Plötzensee Prison, Berlin in 8 August 1944.

General Gustav Heistermann von Ziehlberg has a very interesting story, one of the strangest of all of those who were executed in the aftermath of the 20 July Plot. On 20 July 1944, he was ordered to arrest Major Joachim Kuhn for his part in the plot to kill Hitler. Instead of arresting Kuhn, von Ziehlberg allowed him to go to Berlin of his own accord 'to clear things up'. Instead Kuhn handed himself over to Soviet forces. The following day Kuhn went with General Henning von Tresckow to Królowy Most in Poland, where he committed suicide. Von Ziehlberg was arrested and charged with negligent disobedience and sentenced to nine months in prison as a punishment, but because of his previous service he was pardoned. But that was not the end of the matter and on 30 October he was called to Berlin to meet with Adolf Hitler where he was informed that he was suspected of collaborating with Ludwig Beck and would have to face another trial. He appeared before the People's Court on 21 November 1944, was found guilty as charged and sentenced to death. He was executed by firing squad near the Olympic stadium in Berlin on 2 February 1945.

There were a number of others who were involved in the 20 July Plot, or who were members of the anti-Nazi resistance movement, who are not

included in the above list, because they either survived the war or were never arrested, and other lesser members of the resistance who committed suicide rather than be interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo. Rommel was also part of this list. If he had not accepted the opportunity to commit suicide, he would undoubtedly have experienced the ignominy of facing a People's Court and all that entailed.

It is worth mentioning that Rommel was the only German officer who was involved in the 20 July Plot, of the more than 200 individuals who were arrested and executed, who was offered the opportunity to commit suicide and then given a state funeral. It shows just how important an individual he was, not only to the Nazi Party, which had built him up in the eyes of the German people, and in doing so had, intentionally or otherwise, provided him with an almost cult-like status.

Chapter Seven

Operation Gaff – July 1944

This was the second and only other known operation that was put in place by the Allies to try and assassinate Rommel during the Second World War. It was one that had been planned in some detail over a fifteen month period. Beginning in March 1943, Allied intelligence agencies from both America and the United Kingdom had been researching and monitoring the movements and whereabouts of Erwin Rommel. Part of this research included looking at the feasibility of being able to kill Rommel, which by all accounts was at least the third serious attempt at eliminating him. Such detailed scrutiny of an enemy individual was unprecedented. As far as the Allies were concerned there was a great deal more to be gained from killing or capturing Rommel than there was the Führer of Germany, Adolf Hitler.

By that stage of the war, Allied commanders and politicians had come to realise that Hitler alive was helping them to win the war a lot quicker than if he was dead, mainly because he was such a poor military strategist, stubborn to the point of stupidity, and who would steadfastly not listen to the sound and practical advice given him by his top military leaders.

Although D-Day had been the success that the Allies had hoped it would be, the immediate aftermath was far from easy. D-Day had seen a total of about 150,000 Allied soldiers landed on the beaches of Normandy by midnight of the first day, of whom approximately 3,400 had been killed or listed as missing in action.

Although the seaborne part of the invasion had begun at 6.30 am on 6 June 1944, they were not the first Allied troops ashore that day. At just after midnight 24,000 British and Canadian airborne troops had parachuted into France and landed behind enemy lines.

The amphibious part of the operation had seen American, British and Canadian forces come ashore on five beaches stretching over a distance of some 50 miles of the French coastline in Normandy. American forces landed on two beaches codenamed ‘Utah’ and ‘Omaha’. British forces had come ashore on ‘Gold’ and ‘Sword’ beaches, and Canadian forces on ‘Juno’.

Of American forces who landed on ‘Utah’ only 197 of them became casualties, but those on ‘Omaha’ were not so fortunate, with approximately 3,000 being either killed or wounded. British forces sustained an estimated 2,000 casualties, killed, wounded or missing in action. Of the Canadians who landed on ‘Juno’ beach, 340 were killed, 574 were wounded and 47 captured and taken as prisoners of war.

In the days and weeks after D-Day the Allied forces found themselves up against a dogged and fierce resistance from German units under the command of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. With strict instructions from Adolf Hitler to stand firm against the Allied invaders, no matter the cost, it was an unwritten order to fight to the death.

According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website, between 6 June and 20 July 1944, 10,308 British soldiers died whilst serving in France, along with 2,575 Canadian troops. With such high comparable losses for such a relatively short period of time, Field Marshal Montgomery decided that something needed to be done to reduce them. To this end he agreed that an operation was needed to directly target Rommel and to either capture or kill him, although if the truth be known the latter of the two choices was the easiest and preferred option.

It was eventually discovered that Rommel’s headquarters in France were at a chateau in the village of La Roche-Guyon, in northern France, the home of the dukes de la Rochefoucauld, one of the oldest and most famous families in France which could be traced back to the 10th century. An operation was put in place to kill or capture Rommel and the man whose name was on the bottom of the Operational Order was Brigadier R.W. McLeod of the SAS Regiment. The order was dated 20 July 1944, and read as follows:

SECRET

Copy No. …..

HQ SAS Tps/TSB/5/G

SAS Brigade Operational Instruction No. 32

Operation GAFF – OG 2 SAS Regt

INTENTION

(1) To kill or kidnap and remove to England, Field Marshal ROMMEL, or any senior members of his staff.

INFORMATION

(2) Recent information regarding the location and movement of ROMMEL is contained in:-

i) SHARF letter, 18 Jul 1944, copy attached as Appendix A.

ii) Two signals from HOUNDSWORTH dated 14 and 16 Jul, stating that reliable information obtained from the owner of the estates around ROMMEL's HQ, indicated that this HQ was at Chateau DE LA ROCHE, near LA ROCHE GUYON R.55723 that ROMMEL was there on 25 June; that his staff is there permanently; that he crosses the River SEINE by motor launch and walks and shoots in the FOREST DE NOISSON on the left bank.

iii) A signal from HAFT dated 18 Jul saying that ROMMEL's Tac HQ is at BAGNOLES Y.9798 (HAFT has been asked for further details).

METHOD

(3) This must be left to you and you will submit your detailed proposals as soon as possible to this HQ.

(4) The following points should be borne in mind: If it should prove possible to kidnap ROMMEL and bring him to this country the propaganda value would be immense and the inevitable retaliation against the local inhabitants might be mitigated or avoided. Such a plan

would involve finding and being prepared to hold for a short time if necessary, a suitable landing ground.

(5) To kill ROMMEL would obviously be easier than to kidnap him and it is preferable to ensure the former rather than to attempt and fail in the latter. Kidnapping would require successful two-way W/T communication and therefore a larger party, while killing could be reported by pigeon.

(6) The possibilities of dropping to reception arranged by SFRS should be investigated.

ACKNOWLEDGE
(Signed) R.W. McLeod
Brigadier, Commander, SAS Troops.
c/o HQ Airborne Tps (Main)
APO, England
20.7.44

Brigadier McLeod gave the job of organising and leading the operation to a Frenchman, 24-year-old Raymond Couraud from Surgères, Charente-Maritime in south-west France.

Couraud was no ordinary soldier. He had enlisted in the French Foreign Legion two months after his eighteenth birthday on 19 March 1938. At that time he was not old enough to enlist, so he gave his date of birth as 12 January 1916, which made him 22, and old enough to be accepted as a Legionnaire. When he had successfully completed his basic training he was posted to the 5th Company of the 13th Brigade on 3 March 1940.

His first taste of active service took place during the Battle of Narvik, which began on 9 April 1940 and continued for two months until 8 June. It quickly became obvious that Couraud was both brave and well suited to soldiering. During the fighting his unit were being prevented from moving forward by two German soldiers who were positioned in a defensive position higher up on a small cliff. Couraud volunteered to go forward and attempt to deal with the two enemy combatants. He managed to get close enough to accurately throw a grenade, killing one of them and wounding

the other. Couraud and his unit were then in a position to safely move forward. For his actions that day he was awarded the Croix de Guerre with palm.

On his return from Norway he found himself near Marseille, once again fighting the Germans, this time with the French Army. But it did not go well for his newly acquired French comrades, many of whom were either killed, wounded or captured. Rather than surrender, Couraud decided that he would make his way to England so that he could continue the fight against the German occupiers of his country, but in August 1940, before he managed to make good his escape, he was captured and held as a prisoner of war at Fort Saint Nicholas in Marseille. This was a castle, a fortification built over a four year period between 1660 and 1664, by King Louis XIV. The people of Marseille were told at the time it was being built, that its purpose was to defend the city's port against an enemy attack. Its actual purpose was to help protect the governor against the city's rioting population. To support this, the fortification's guns pointed into the city and not towards the harbour and out to sea.

After having been incarcerated at Fort St Nicholas for four months Couraud was put before a military tribunal in December 1940, which was under the control of the Vichy French government led by Marshal Philippe Pétain. His luck held out and he was acquitted and released. On this occasion he did not attempt to make his way across the English Channel, instead he turned his skills to the world of criminality and dealing in the trade of illegally acquired goods. He also helped refugees wanting to escape France and the Nazi occupation, by organising routes on foot through the Pyrenees mountains into neutral Spain, or on board ships heading for ports mainly in North or South America.

In April 1941 Couraud was arrested by Spanish authorities at a railway station in Madrid whilst waiting to catch a train to Barcelona, where he intended visiting the British Consulate. His punishment was to be interned in Spain for four months. He quickly decided that on his release he would make his way to England, which he did, eventually arriving in the middle of October 1941. There he enrolled in the Free French Forces, part of the

French government in exile in London under the command of General Charles de Gaulle.

Couraud's variety of skills were put to good use straightaway and he was posted to the Action Militaire section of the Bureau Central de Renseignements et d'Action, or the Central Bureau of Intelligence and Operations, where he found himself working for Colonel Maurice Buckmaster who ran the French section of the Special Operations Executive. Couraud worked hard and was soon recognised as being an effective, skilful and useful member of the team, which in part saw him commissioned as a second lieutenant, and with a name change to Jack William Raymond Lee.

On 28 March 1942 Couraud took part in the now famous St Nazaire Raid, an amphibious attack on a heavily defended dry dock at St Nazaire, which was put out of action for the rest of the war and beyond. An obsolete British destroyer, HMS *Campbeltown* was wedged into the gates of the dry dock full of explosives which had been set with a time delay fuse to explode later the same day. This meant that any of Germany's large war ships which needed repairs would have to return to Germany, and their only way of doing that was either via the English Channel or the GIUK gap in the Northern Atlantic Ocean, a stretch of water between the top of Scotland and Iceland. Both areas were controlled by vessels of the Royal Navy.

The raid was a success, but it came at a cost. Of the 611 British Commandos and Royal Navy personnel who took part, 169 were killed, and 215 were captured and became prisoners of war. Half of those who returned were wounded. Couraud was one of them. Having been shot in both legs he spent nearly four months in hospital recovering from his wounds, before returning to active service in August the same year.

Couraud's somewhat maverick and cavalier attitude towards life in general, saw him fall out with his senior officers after a number of indiscretions and breaches of standard security protocols. This resulted in his services no longer being required by the Special Operations Executive, but that was not to be the end of his war time involvement. Rather than a return to civilian life he was transferred to No. 62 Commando, which was known as a Small Scale Raiding Force, and based in Algeria under the

command of Colonel Bill Stirling, the elder brother of Colonel David Stirling, who was the founder of the Special Air Service.

In March 1943 Couraud was promoted to the rank of captain and put in command of the newly formed 2 SAS, French 2nd Squadron, which consisted purely of French soldiers who had previously served with 2 SAS. An extremely busy twelve month period of active service followed for Couraud and his men, so in April 1944 they were sent to Scotland for recuperation. Whilst back in the UK Couraud was given the somewhat unusual task of setting up a specialist unit whose job it would be to assassinate high ranking Nazi and Wehrmacht officers after successful landings in German occupied France after D-Day. It was not a job for the faint-hearted, and although by no means a suicide mission, the chances of survival were not high by any stretch of the imagination.

The location of Rommel's headquarters at La Roche-Guyon was only discovered on 9 June 1944. Couraud and his team readied themselves to be deployed to France. After their preparations were complete and the weather was deemed to be suitable, they were flown across the English Channel and parachuted into France over Orleans, where they arrived on 18 July 1944. What nobody on the Allied side could possibly have known was that the day before Couraud and his men arrived, Rommel had been badly wounded in an attack by Allied aircraft. Couraud only found out about the situation on the day they landed in France, leaving him with no other option but to abort the mission. Instead the six man team decided to make their way towards advancing American forces.

In a strange twist of fate Rommel being wounded on 17 July 1944 ultimately resulted in his death. If he had not been wounded, there is every possibility that he may have been captured by Couraud and brought to England, where he would have survived the war and gone on to have died of nothing more sinister than old age.

The man who replaced the wounded Rommel was Gunther Adolf Ferdinand von Kluge. In 1943, he had been badly injured in a car accident. After the 20 July plot, Kluge was not one of those immediately rounded up by the SS or the Gestapo on suspicion of being involved in the plot, which he wasn't, but he was sympathetic to their cause. In August 1944 he was

invited to a meeting with Hitler in Berlin and, fearing the worst, he committed suicide on 19 August 1944. Whether he was right to be afraid is not clear, but he wasn't going to Berlin to find out.

Kluge was replaced by Field Marshal Walter Model who, like both Rommel and von Kluge, did not survive the war. On 21 April 1945, in a forest between Duisburg and Lintorf, Model removed his service pistol from its holster, put it to his head and pulled the trigger.

Couraud and his men took out their frustration at having their operation cancelled by attacking trains and German Army units as they made their way back through enemy lines. On 12 August 1944, they finally managed to link up with General Patton's Third Army which had managed to break out from Normandy, and began their march across France to get to the prize that everybody wanted – Berlin and the end of the war.

A week later on 19 August Couraud and his men, as part of Patton's Army, helped enable the first Allied bridgehead over the River Seine at Mantes. It was there just a couple of weeks earlier they had successfully attacked a German headquarters.

The immediate aftermath of Operation Gaff was very significant. Since, quite clearly, no extraction plan had been put in place for what to do if Rommel was taken alive, it seems clear that despite what was contained within the operational order, the intention was always to kill Rommel. There were no plans for him to be picked up either by air or sea. It was exactly the same for Couraud and his men. In reality if Rommel was captured and taken away by a raiding party and the Germans knew that he was still alive, they would have had thousands of their men out looking for him. No stone would have been left unturned in the search to find him and those responsible for his capture. The Germans would have no doubt reacted exactly the same way if Couraud and his men had assassinated Rommel.

It is more than likely that in 1944 British Military Intelligence knew of the existence of Hitler's Commando Order issued on 18 October 1942, which stated that all Allied Commandos, agents or saboteurs who were captured by German forces in either Europe or Africa were to be executed immediately. There were no exceptions to this order. There were to be no

trials. It mattered not whether they were in military or civilian clothes, or even if they had, or were attempting to surrender.

Both Operations Flipper and Gaff, although initiated in part for different reasons, highlighted how difficult it was to even attempt such raids. By their very nature such events took time to plan, organise and select those who were going to be involved. Running parallel to this was the issue of security and the worries about the enemy discovering that such an operation was being planned.

War by its very nature was fluid and sometimes the whereabouts of an entire unit was unknown to an enemy, so trying to keep track of a single individual was never going to be easy. This made it extremely difficult to come up with a plan that would then be used as part of an operation, whilst catering for a number of eventualities.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, especially when it is being gauged in historical terms, but it seems odd that there was even a consideration for such operations to be conducted by commandos. Surely the better option would have been to use the RAF. That way once a location for a target such as Rommel had been discovered and confirmed, all that was required was for a squadron of RAF bombers to be quickly briefed, given the co-ordinates of the target premises, and sent across the English Channel to carry out the raid.

There were, of course, inherent dangers with conducting a raid in this manner. If the target building was contained within, or part of a built up residential area, there was always the possibility that other properties would be damaged or destroyed, and civilians inside either injured or killed. The other aspect was the potential for aircraft to be lost. If for instance the aircraft being used in the raid was a Lancaster bomber, this required a seven man crew, so for every aircraft shot down by German anti-aircraft batteries, seven men were lost. The better option may have been the aerial attack, because it was an operation which could be activated and put in place very quickly.

Report on Operation GAFF
By Captain S.W. Lee

Tues 25 Jul Successful landing – good DZ, but three leg bags smashed (string broken) – cannot find container.

Wed 26 Jul Contacted locals – extremely helpful. Spent most of the day looking for container, Cannot find it. Three young Frenchmen want to come with us. I engaged them and for the rest of the op – they'll be extremely good and useful for going for information wherever I want to send them, to get us food and especially to recce on bicycle during daylight, the roads that I shall be taking the next evening.

Thurs 27 Jul Journey to plateau – spent the night in a farm.

Fri 28 Jul Journey to ST REMY de CHEVREUX. Stayed for two days in a chateau – ate plastic and was extremely sick for two days: cured myself with six gallons of milk – learned that Rommel had been got.

Sat 29 Jul Journey to a farm near MAUREPAS.

Sun 30 Jul Journey to BEYNES – went to a safe farm on the ST CYR ROUGE (my base since).

Mon 31 Jul Journey to ROSAY.

Tues 1 Aug Journey to MERICOURT. We live in the woods and I start getting information on my target. I learn that they have been bombed two days before and that everybody but a few soldiers have left for another HQ – I cannot find where. I stayed for two days in the area and I am glad that I do not have to attack this place. I can see that it was very well protected. Then I decide to go back to BEYNE, make my base there and start working as well as I can.

Fri 4 Aug to Sat 12 Aug Extremely successful week. We walk at night from our base, go to our target on well known roads (my three young Frenchmen are extremely useful all the time) and come back next morning

unseen. We got two trains – 9F6705408 with blowing the line under it with a pull switch and a long string. Due to its lack of speed could not derail it but it had to stop and was set on fire at dawn by Lightnings. The other, 9F4682568, was got single handed with 2 mags of Bren gun in the engine by 1. C1 MOORE. The train stopped and again was set on fire next morning by fighters.

3 lorries from a convoy in 9F6687555, 4 lorries on different small roads, 1 staff car driven by a Gestapo major (got his papers) in 9G2709305, 1 staff car (9F6578531) with 1 motor-cyclist in front, 1 driver, 1 body guard and 1 high ranking German officer, certainly a colonel possibly a minor general. We could not get to him because as we fired on the car, German lorries came down the road, stopped and took defensive positions.

I attacked the Kommandtur at MONTS to try to get the car, but the alarm was given and I failed. 4 jerries were killed by us, but as my Sgt MARK talked to the sentry in German they thought they had been attacked by Germans, and started shooting each other in the dark. I was told next day that 12 corpses were found (?).

As we ran short of amn and supplies on Sat 12 Aug, I decided to leave my men in the base (9F6722458) where they were well looked after and safe, and to join our lines to contact our HQ, and if possible to return later with more men and supplies. I left on Sun morning, 13 Aug, disguised as a gendarme and on a bicycle from Gendarmerie to Gendarmerie, and reached the American lines near BROU (SW of CHARTRES), passing through RAMBOUILLET, ALBIS, AUNEAU, CHARTRES, ILLIERS and BROU.

My intention is to go back on Sat night 19 Aug, with 20 men, radio set and 2 jeeps, and disperse 5 parties around PARIS in a half circle – in parties of five – and attack every German transport at night on the roads, leaving from the front to PARIS – in any case it is necessary that Lt ROILLARD should be resupplied soon, if I cannot go myself. I am certain that 100 German lorries and cars could be destroyed by those 5 parties of 5, every 3 days.

<u>CONCLUSION</u> There was no Maquis or active organised resistance in my area, not many collaborators and no Gestapo. The

French were helpful as soon as they knew we were genuine, food plentiful. The Gendarmes were all perfect and ready to take a very active part in anything, but it is necessary that every party of five men should have a very good French speaker.

The best thing to keep one's security is to find a good farm near a wood if possible, and not move during the day at all (in an area where Jerry is at all numerous), have recces done by young Frenchmen during the day and on bicycles, and be guided by them at night. If in possession of a good knowledge of the area, there is no reason why one should not move at night on secondary roads and consequently waste no time moving across country.

<u>Situation of Germans in this area Sun 17th</u>

(To be bombed) one castle with 70 SS and transport (10F5, 752465). Possibly 3 aerodromes in VERSAILLES area (NW), the most important is SUIPPES, near TOUSSUS (9G1), possibly 150 fighters, some light bombers, very widely dispersed.

60 Germans (transport) in BEYNE (9F6).
200 in MAULE (Transport) (9F6).
80 and transport in ARNOUVILLE (9F6.) 80 in MANTES GASSICOURT (KOMMANTUR and railway People). 100 (TODT) in GUERVILLE (9F6).
Petrol depot and 60 Germans, and 30 lorries, in VILLECONIN (10G3086062).
Petrol depot and 40 Russians in ST REMY de CHEVREUSE (10G1844286).

Chapter Eight

Rommel's Death – October 1944

After the assassination attempt on Hitler's life on 20 July 1944, a 'Court of Military Honour' – a court-martial held in the field to deal with urgent charges of offences committed in action – was set up to deal with those who, it was believed, were involved in the plot to kill Adolf Hitler.

Those who formed the court's members were Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm Keitel, Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt, Generaloberst Heinz Guderian, General der Infanterie Walther Schroth, Generalleutnant Karl-Wilhelm Specht, General der Infanterie Karl Kriebel and Generalleutnant Heinrich Kirchheim. The courts protocol officer, and one of the two who attended Rommel's home on 14 October 1944, was Generalmajor Ernst Maisel.

Despite Heinrich Kirchheim having been in the Army since 1900 and a holder of the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross as well as the Pour le Mérite, he was sacked by Rommel on 30 May 1941, after Germany's failed attempt at capturing Tobruk. So it would be fair to suggest that Kirchheim was no fan of Rommel's and might have had an axe to grind with him.

Collectively these eight men not only held Rommel's life in their hands but also the future of their nation. They had in their possession information from Speidel, Hofacker and others, which had been obtained either as the result of torture or under the threat of it, which implicated Rommel in the attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler on 20 July 1944. By the time the eight men had finished their deliberations, Rommel had been found guilty as charged. This usually resulted in the guilty individual being unceremoniously brought before the People's Court, which operated outside of the constitutional frame of law. This court came under the presidency of

Roland Freisler, a Nazi Judge and politician. Nobody was ever found not guilty at a People's Court hearing. It was quite simply a kangaroo court which came up with whatever decision that Adolf Hitler wanted to hear.

On this occasion the person concerned was not just any German general, it was Erwin Rommel, who was loved and respected by soldiers and civilians alike. To place him before Roland Freisler and a People's Court as a traitor and then have him executed, would not be good for morale either on the home front or in the hearts of the remaining soldiers which Hitler had at his disposal. So the only way to deal with the matter was for Rommel to commit suicide with the assurance from Hitler that he would be given a state funeral, and that not only would his family not be harmed, but would be looked after financially and provided with a pension for his military service.

Rommel died on 14 October 1944, near the picturesque village of Herrlingen, in the Swabian Alps, a mountain range in Baden-Württemberg that he both knew well and loved. It was a place he had been associated with since his childhood and somewhere he saw as being a much safer alternative for him and his family to live, rather than a city that was more likely to fall victim to Allied bombing.

Although revered by the nation's people for his military achievements throughout the Second World War, he had made himself an enemy of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. Rommel was a loyal German son, not a Nazi, and there was a massive difference between the two. He could see the utter disaster, devastation and defeat that Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party were leading his beloved Germany into, a situation that he felt compelled to do something about.

As early as 1942, it was clear to many in the German military that the war was already lost, and it was simply a matter of time before that fact was confirmed. The concern for them was, how many Germans would have to be sacrificed in the meantime. It was about the same time that Rommel began to struggle with the concept of Hitler being a military leader, especially one who he did not believe had either the skill or knowledge necessary for the role. It was clear to Rommel that there were times when a

situation would arise that most observers would recognise as requiring an obvious and certain course of action to be taken, which Hitler either did not understand, or if he did, chose not to take, usually to the detriment of his armed forces or the civilian population.

By 1944 Rommel and his chief of staff, Hans Spiedel, had begun developing a plan, to make a separate peace with the Allies, but before they had got far with the planning, Rommel's designs were discovered by the Nazis, and once that happened it became a case of when and how Rommel would be killed rather than if. Even for someone of his reputation, both nationally and internationally, in the eyes of the Nazis not only had he gone too far, but they saw him as a traitor to the cause as well as to the nation. He had in effect challenged Hitler's authority, something which he, nor the Nazi Party could not allow to go unpunished.

In the aftermath of the failed 20 July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler, a large number of individuals were interrogated and tortured to try and find out what they knew of the plot and who else had been involved in it. The plan Rommel and Hans Spiedel were formulating to make a separate peace with the Allies would not have been widely known, and it is quite conceivable that only the two of them knew anything about it at all. So it is more than likely it was his disillusionment over Hitler that betrayed him, a fact of which those in Rommel's inner circle were aware. Of Stauffenberg's attempts at killing Hitler during the failed assassination attempt of 20 July 1944, he is reported to have said that 'Stauffenberg had bungled it', which of course he did.

Rommel was first and foremost a proud German and an excellent soldier. He had never been a Nazi, and the longer the war went on, he became less and less a supporter of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, a feeling that only worsened as the situation for the German people, as well those serving in the military, became more and more precarious, because of decisions that Hitler had made, apparently unconcerned as to how they affected the civilian population or the men who served in his armed forces. The problem for Rommel was that he began to make his feelings about what he thought of Hitler known, which was dangerous for anybody.

Rommel was requested to attend an important meeting at Hitler's headquarters in Berlin on 10 October 1944, by Field Martial Wilhelm Keitel, in the form of a telephone call on 7 October. It was so important that Rommel attended that meeting that Keitel informed him that a train was going to be sent to Ulm to collect him. Whether he suspected something wasn't quite right isn't clear, but the first person he contacted after receiving that telephone call from Keitel was Professor Albrecht, one of the physicians who had treated him for his injuries sustained at Normandy. Albrecht informed Rommel that in his professional opinion he was not fit enough to make such a journey. This conversation must have also roused Albrecht's suspicions, as he immediately tried to get Rommel to move to his clinic which was hidden far away from the prying eyes of the SS and the Gestapo. At least there Rommel would be safe for some time as its location was only known to a few close friends and colleagues.

After some discussion between the two men, Rommel agreed that he and his wife would move out of their home and move in with Professor Albrecht at his clinic. The date of 20 October was agreed. Unfortunately it was an agreement which would never be kept. Because Rommel had been unable to make the appointment in Berlin, arrangements had been made for two high ranking German officers to visit Rommel at his home. That visit took place on 14 October 1944, nearly a week before his intended escape to Professor Albrecht's clinic.

The fact that both Rommel and Albrecht felt that it was important to make such a move, suggests that they both believed that Rommel was in some kind of danger, even though it has been claimed that Rommel believed Burgdorf and Maisel were visiting him to discuss his next command, which he thought was going to be somewhere on the Eastern Front.

On the day of his death Rommel was faced with a dilemma, one that was not going to turn out well for him, no matter what choice he made. The decision had already been made by Hitler that Rommel had to die, but because of his standing both within the hearts of the civilian population as well as amongst the officers and men of the German military, he could not

simply be murdered; even Hitler understood the potential fall-out and effect on morale if such an event were to take place.

On the day of his death Rommel was visited by Wilhelm Burgdorf and Ernst Maisel, a couple of Hitler's 'henchmen'. Burgdorf was a general and staff officer in the German Army. In October 1944, he was the Chief of the Army Personnel Office, as well as being the Chief Adjutant to Adolf Hitler. He had been a career soldier, having first been commissioned as an officer in 1915.

Burgdorf arrived at Rommel's home on 14 October 1944, and informed Rommel that he had been implicated in the plot to assassinate Hitler on 20 April 1944. Rommel was handed copies of the interrogations of Lieutenant Colonel Caesar von Hofacker, General Carl-Heinrich Rudolf Wilhelm von Stülpnagel and General Hans Speidel, and told that if the attempt to kill Hitler had been successful, the intention of the main conspirators was for Rommel to have been made the nation's new Chief of State.

In fact Rommel would have been the ideal man to lead a new Germany and, if he had survived the war, the Allied authorities would, no doubt, have wanted him to fill in as leader of a defeated Germany. He was well liked by the German people, amongst whom he was idolised, and the military alike. His reputation in the eyes of his enemies and adversaries was just as popular. It is unfortunate that those in the German military who had begun planning Hitler's death, hadn't done so earlier and been more successful in their attempts, because if they had managed to have dispensed with Hitler as early as 1942 and replaced him with Rommel, hundreds of thousands of lives would have been saved, both civilian and military personnel, Allied and German.

The biggest casualty of Germany's inability to rid themselves of Hitler were the Jews. Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre, has estimated that between 20 March 1942 and the end of the war, Auschwitz II Concentration Camp – a complex of more than forty concentration and extermination camps – witnessed the deaths of 960,000 Jews. Throughout all camps and during the same time frame the estimated number is between five and six million Jewish people.

Rommel was given a letter that was signed by Keitel informing him that he had three choices. If he believed that he was innocent of the charges against him, he could argue his case personally to Hitler in Berlin. If he declined this option it would be considered an admission of guilt on his part. He could commit suicide by taking poison. If he chose this option, it would be announced that he had died of injuries sustained in battle, given a state funeral, and obtain immunity for his family. His third and final choice was to be put before a People's Court where he would face a trial for treason. Such courts always found those who stood charged, guilty. Rommel chose the suicide option.

After a brief discussion with his wife and son Manfred, Rommel left with Burgdorf and Maisel in a car and twenty minutes later the phone rang at Rommel's home. The call was answered by Captain Aldinger and informed him that Rommel was dead, having suffered a brain haemorrhage. The caller probably didn't know that Rommel had informed Aldinger he was to commit suicide by his own hand. After his death Rommel was driven to the Wangerschule Reserve Hospital in Ulm, where the hospital authorities were told not to touch the body, and under no circumstances were they to perform an autopsy on it.

It was later revealed at the Nuremberg trials that Hitler had informed a number of his inner circle that Rommel had in fact died at his home where he had been recuperating. During this period of time he said, Rommel had taken to tending to his garden and it was the repetition of bending down and standing up straight again after picking mushrooms which had induced a stroke from which he had subsequently died. The irony here was that everybody would have known Rommel had in fact committed suicide, but they had to go along with the pretence that they did not know.

Over the course of time there has been much debate amongst historians about who ordered Rommel's assassination, but surely such a decision could only have come from Hitler. Nobody, no matter how high up they were in either the Nazi Party or the SS, would have given such an order without direct permission from the Führer to have done so.

Burgdorf did not survive the war. Somewhat ironically, he committed suicide in Hitler's bunker on the morning of 2 May 1945.

Maisel was a Generalleutnant in the German Army and also the Chief of the Office Group for Officers' Education and Welfare. In the aftermath of the attempt to assassinate Hitler on 20 July 1944, the Army Court of Honour was set up to investigate Army officers who, it was believed, had been involved in the assassination plot in some way. As part of this process, Maisel had been the court protocol officer. He was captured by the Americans on 7 May 1945, at which time he was the newly appointed commander of the German 68th Infantry Division. He remained in captivity until March 1947.

With only one decision he could make of the three options Rommel was presented with by Burgdorf and Maisel, what was about to happen to him would have been relatively straightforward. What would have been extremely difficult was the farewell conversation with his wife, Lucie, and son Manfred. This wasn't just a goodbye before he went off to return to his unit, set off to attend a conference, inspect some troops or some coastal defences. He was leaving forever and would never again walk through the door of his home and into the arms of his loving family. He knew it and so did they and he only had a matter of minutes to have those conversations with the two people who mattered most to him in the world.

Hans Speidel, Rommel's Chief of Staff, was a nationalist and, like many of his generation, wanted to see Germany return to being the great power that she once was. In that respect he was a supporter of Hitler, but he vehemently disagreed with him and the Nazi Party when it came to their policies on race, and in particular what they referred to as the 'Jewish problem'.

When Rommel was wounded on 17 July 1944, when his car was strafed by an aircraft of the RAF, it was during his recovery that the relationship between Speidel and Rommel really took off. Unbeknown to Rommel, Speidel had been tasked with those involved in the 20 July plot to gain his confidence and when the time was right, to get him on board with the conspiracy against Hitler.

The truth about Rommel's death only came out at the end of the war when his son, Manfred Rommel, who had been captured by the Americans,

gave them a statement concerning the exact circumstances leading up to his father's death and how he had died.

Manfred Rommel followed his father into the German military, during the Second World War. As a 14-year-old boy in 1943 he began serving with an anti-aircraft battery as an air force assistant or a Luftwaffenhelfer. He informed his father that he wanted to enlist in the Waffen-SS, but Rommel forbade him to do so. Just two months after his sixteenth birthday, in February 1945, he was dismissed from the Luftwaffe, and the following month he became a member of the Reichsarbeitsdein, a paramilitary organisation, and found himself stationed in the town of Riedlingen in south west Germany.

Possibly because of the fact he would have been extremely disillusioned over his father's enforced suicide the previous October, and the trauma which he had suffered because of it, he deserted from his unit in April 1945. He surrendered to elements of the French First Army soon after, disclosing his true identity. It was whilst being interrogated that he revealed the actual circumstances of his father's death which were unknown to the Allies at the time. They had believed the story put out by Nazi Germany that he had died of his wounds sustained when his chauffeur-driven staff car had been strafed by Allied aircraft in the Normandy on 17 July 1944. The French later handed Manfred Rommel over to the Americans.

On 27 April 1945, in Riedlingen, Germany, Manfred Rommel made the following statement to American military authorities, it was typed in English:

> I, Manfred Rommel, born at Stuttgart on the 24th December 1928, as son of Erwin ROMMEL, then a Captain, in the course of the present war advanced to Field Marshal, and of his wife, Lucie Maria ROMMEL, nee MOLLIN, make herewith the following deposition:
>
> My Father, Field Marshal Erwin ROMMEL, did not die a natural death at HERRLINGEN on the 14th October 1944, but was removed in the manner described as follows by order of the Reich Chancellor, Adolf Hitler.

> My father received serious head injuries in France near LIVAROT (Calvados) on the 17th July 1944, in an American dive bombing raid through the explosion of an a/c shell (skull fractured) in four places, and many splinters in his face.

This part of his statement raises a very interesting point as he states that the aerial attack carried out on his father's staff car was by American aircraft. The first question here is how did either Erwin or Manfred Rommel know the attack was carried out by the Americans. It is interesting from another perspective because to this very day there is still debate and discussion surrounding the identity of the pilot who carried out the attack, and which country he was from.

The Tangmere Military Aviation Museum, near Chichester in West Sussex, carries an interesting article on its website by archivist Reginald Byron. His piece includes the names of an American pilot, Captain Ralph C. Jenkins of the 510th Fighter-Bomber Squadron, who was flying a P-47 Thunderbolt, which had the capacity to fire either 5-inch rockets or up to 2,500 lbs of bombs.

Charley Fox was a member of 412 Squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force, who on 17 July 1944 was flying a Spitfire in the skies above Livarot at the time Rommel's staff car was attacked. Another member of 412 Squadron on 17 July 1944, who is also named as the pilot who attacked Rommel's staff car, was Edward L. Prizer Jr, who was an American by birth but a pilot serving with the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War.

Flying Officer Bruce Oliver, a member of the Royal Air Force's 602 Squadron, attacked two German staff cars on the day in question. One he bombed and the other he strafed with his machine guns.

If Manfred Rommel is correct then it must have been American pilot, Captain Ralph C. Jenkins who strafed Rommel's staff car, although the location of his attack and the timings do not match up with the one on Rommel's staff car. The reality is, we will never know for certain.

Manfred Rommel continued:

He was first treated in a hospital near PARIS, and when he was in a fit condition to be moved, he was taken by car to HERRLINGEN near ULM to his residence there. He was out of danger. The fracture of the skull was already considered to be practically healed. My father was already taking walks. I myself have by then been transferred from the Home Air Defence Troop, to which I have been assigned as auxiliary, in order to be of service to my father. My father was still suffering from paralysis of the left eye. He was under the care of Professor ALBRECHT and Professor STOCK, both of the TUBINGEN University Clinic.

On the 7th October, 1944, I had to report to my AA Troop, and came home on short leave on the 14th October 1944. I arrived by the 6 o'clock train. My father was well, and we had breakfast together. We went for a walk until 11 o'clock, and during our walk he told me that two Army Generals would be coming that day, viz: General MEISEL and General BURGSDORF, both of the Army personnel branch. He said that the affair struck him as somewhat suspicious, and that he was not sure whether the reason given, to discuss with him his future appointment, was not being made to serve as a camouflaged plot for his removal.

At 12 o'clock my father received the two generals. My father asked me to leave the room. About three quarters of an hour after that I met my father just coming out of my mother's room. He then told me that he had taken his leave of my mother, and that Adolf HITLER had given him the choice between taking poison or being brought before the People's Court. Adolf HITLER had also let him know that in the event of his committing suicide, nothing was to happen to his family; the family, on the contrary, would be provided for.

Besides Burgdorf, Meisel and an SS driver, there was a fourth individual who had arrived at the Rommel home, he was Major Anton Ehrenberger, who was Meisel's adjutant. Although Manfred Rommel spells his name as Meisel, it was actually spelt Maisel.

A search of the UK's National Archives comes up with 245 hits if you enter 'Rommel' in the search engine. One of these has the reference number of HW/19/206, and covers the dates 20 to 25 October 1944. It refers to the

Government Code and Cypher School, which for most of the Second World War was at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire. The reference relates to messages that were sent out by Germany's Military Intelligence Service, the Abwehr and the Sicherheitsdienst, and intercepted by the Government Code and Cypher School. One of these intercepted messages talks of Rommel having shot himself, and makes no mention of him committing suicide by having taken poison.

If Rommel did in fact die by a gunshot and not poison, then it is also feasible that General Burgdorf pulled the trigger, as he was the only one who was actually with Rommel at the time of his death. The driver of the vehicle, SS Sergeant Doose, General Meisel and Major Ehrnsperger had left the two men on their own.

Rommel's body was cremated, the result of orders from Nazi authorities in Berlin. Some would say that this was to prevent future exhumation of the body so that the poisoning could not be discovered, but what if the cremation had taken place to prevent the later discovery that Rommel had in fact been shot, either by himself or by the hand of General Burgsdorf. Unfortunately because of the national lockdown regulations that were in place in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic at the time of writing this book, it was not possible to visit the National Archives in person to view the exact content of this reference, or to order a copy of it on line.

Manfred Rommel continued:

In the meantime, we had made the discovery that there were at least 4 or 5 MT vehicles posted round the house. The vehicles appeared to be occupied by armed civilians, so that the guard of 8 men in our house, who were provided with two tommy-guns would have been powerless. Having said farewell to me and the Staff Officer, Captain ALDINGER, my Father left the house in uniform, with his leather coat, Marshal's staff and cap, we accompanying him to the car, where the General saluted him with Heil Hitler. We noted that the driver was an SS man. My Father got into the car first and took a seat at the back, followed by the Generals. The car drove off in the direction of BLAUBEUREN; 15 minutes later we had a telephone

call from the General Hospital (at) Wagnerschule in ULM to say that my father had been brought there by the two Generals, and had apparently succumbed there to an attack of cerebral apoplexy.

In my last talk with my Father, he told me what follows: 'That he had been suspected of complicity in the 20th July 1944 (Plot). That his former Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. SPRIDEL, who had been arrested a few weeks before, had stated that my father had taken a leading part in the 20th July, 1944 (Plot), and had only been prevented from direct co-operation by his injuries. Similar statements had been made by General Von STULPNAGEL, who, after having been relieved of his command by Field Marshal Von Kluge, went off by car in the direction of Germany, attempted to shoot himself on the way, but only succeeded in blinding himself. The SS Security Service discovered him, gave him blood transfusions to restore him to consciousness and get statements from him. Later on he was hanged.

General Carl-Heinrich von Stulpnagel was a career soldier, having begun his military service in 1904. He had served as a staff officer during the First World War. On 30 August 1944, he was tried before the Volksgerichtshof, or People's Court in Berlin, found guilty of High Treason and hanged later the same day at Plötzensee Prison in the north of the city.

Manfred Rommel continued:

Moreover my Father's name figures in Chief Burgomaster GOER DELLE'S list as Prime Minister. The Führer, he was informed, did not wish to lower his prestige with the German people so was offering him the chance of a voluntary death by means of a poison pill, which was to be handed him en route by one of the two Generals. It would have a mortal effect within seconds. In the event of his refusing, he was to be arrested immediately, and brought before the People's Court. My Father chose a voluntary death.

I herewith declare on oath and in the presence of witnesses that all the foregoing statements are true.

Witness: Friedrich HUOBER.

Signature. Manfred Rommel.

Captain Hermann Aldinger and Rommel had been friends and comrades for many years, were both from Württemberg and had served alongside each other during the First World War. In civilian life he had been a notable architect of green spaces. On being told by Rommel what was about to happen to him, Aldinger suggested they defend themselves and fight rather than give up. Rommel explained that was not an option because of the promise he had been made that no harm would become his family, and that they would be financially looked after if he committed suicide. If he didn't surrender himself freely to his fate, he would be put before a People's Court, found guilty and hanged. His family would also not be well treated either. Aldinger survived the war and died in 1972.

Rommel's funeral took place on the morning of 18 October 1944, in Ulm, just four days after his death, with full military honours. His coffin was adorned with a Nazi flag, his Marshal's baton, a ceremonial sword and his German steel helmet, and was carried on the back of a gun carriage, which in turn was drawn by a Sd. Kfz. 7 Half-track Personnel Carrier 8t Grau.

What the aforementioned letter does show is just how brave and honourable a man Erwin Rommel was. When confronted with his options, commit suicide and save your family, or refuse and you will die anyway and we will ruin your family, he knew instinctively what had to be done. He said goodbye to his wife, son and colleagues, and fifteen minutes later he was dead.

On 17 November 2013, a very interesting article appeared in the *Daily Mail* newspaper's internet based version, Mailonline. The article concerned a Doctor Friedrich Breiderhoff, who on 14 October 1944, worked as the chief physician at the German reserve military hospital at Ulm. There is no mention of the time of day but he was called out to the front of the hospital by two senior military officers, no doubt these were Generals Burgdorf and Maisel, where there was a car. He was told to look inside where he saw Rommel slumped on the back seat of the vehicle, with his military cap and

his marshal's baton lying in the rear footwell. It would, one would have thought, been obvious to Doctor Breiderhoff that Rommel was in fact dead, but a man in a suit and trilby style hat, more than likely a member of the Gestapo, ordered the doctor to start trying to resuscitate him. The doctor injected a solution into Rommel's heart, possibly adrenalin, and followed that up with heart massage, but all to no avail as Rommel was already dead.

Breiderhoff was then ordered to remove vomit from Rommel's mouth, and whilst doing so he discovered what he took to be an empty cyanide capsule from his throat. He was further instructed to complete a death certificate which was to include the fact that the cause of death was a heart attack. If he refused to do so, or if he told anybody about what had happened, there would be consequences not only for himself, but members of his family as well.

On 22 July 1960, and feeling that he was at last able to do so, Breiderhoff finally made known the events in which he had been involved in on 14 October 1944. He did this by handing a seven page report to the police in Cologne. Its existence was never made public, until it was discovered in the German national archives in November 2013.

In fairness to the Cologne police, even if they had made public Doctor Breiderhoff 's report back in 1960, other than its contents being known fifty-three years earlier than it actually was, what real difference would it have made? It was already known via Manfred Rommel's statement to the Americans in 1945 that his father had not died from natural causes.

Ironically in the circumstances, Burgdorf also met his death by committing suicide, when he killed himself in the Führer bunker in Berlin on 2 May 1945.

General Ernst Maisel was captured by the Americans on 7 May 1945. He did not face any war crimes trial and was released by the Americans in March 1947. He died in 1978 at the age of 82. His adjutant was Major Anton Ehrenberger but I was unable to establish what happened to him at the end of the war.

Conclusion

Was Rommel an outstanding military tactician?
Rommel relied more on his gut instinct than he did on any laid down, accepted procedural rule book, he was quick thinking and extremely flexible. He had the ability to think one step ahead, which quite often meant he could second guess what his adversaries were going to do on the battlefield.

Would capturing or killing Rommel have greatly helped the Allied war effort?
The Nazi Party had put the full weight of their propaganda machine behind Rommel to make him out to be a 'superhero' in the minds of the German people as well as those who were serving in the German military. The big lie, or falsehood, which the Nazis sold was that Rommel was invincible and so, with him on their side, anything was possible and they simply could not lose. The loss of such a 'hero' would therefore affect morale amongst the German forces. The same propaganda made sure that Rommel's presence on the battlefield, or even the suggestion that he might be present, most likely would have had a negative impact on the Allied soldiers. Such a loss could only boost the Allies' morale.

Were the British authorities right to try and assassinate Rommel?
Definitely, but in relation to Operation Flipper they simply went about it in the wrong way. The most important element of such an operation is the intelligence aspect. Confirming a location and that the person you are targeting is there, is paramount. An operation without those two bits of

information should never go ahead, and Operation Flipper most definitely comes into that category. However harsh this might sound, it has to be said. Operation Flipper appears to have gone ahead at the insistence of one man, Geoffrey Keyes, in an attempt by him to be covered in personal glory.

Compare this attempt with Project Doctor, a plan to assassinate Rommel, which was refused permission to go ahead because of a lack of 'solid' enough and confirmed intelligence. Operation Gaff was cancelled after it was discovered Rommel had been badly wounded in a strafing raid by aircraft of the RAF. This was well planned and after the location of Rommel's headquarters had been discovered British Special Forces operatives were put in place to confirm his presence, before any direct action went ahead.

A certain irony could be said to be attached to Rommel's death. Here was an individual who the British authorities had drawn up plans to capture or kill on three separate occasions that we know of, none of which were successful. His abilities as a military tactician, and his morale boosting influence on the German people was such that his death or capture by British authorities would have undoubtedly reduced the length of the war.

In October 1944, with Germany in full retreat and just seven months away from defeat in the Second World War, Adolf Hitler decided that he should die. The man who led his nation into total annihilation decided that the one man who could have possibly been their saviour had no place in Nazi Germany.

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About the Author

Stephen is a very happily retired police officer having served with Essex Police as a Constable for thirty years between 1983 and 2013. His wife, Tanya, is also his best friend.

Both his sons, Luke and Ross, were members of the armed forces, collectively serving five tours of Afghanistan between 2008 and 2013. Both were injured on their first tour. This led to his first book; *Two Sons in a Warzone – Afghanistan: The True Story of a Fathers Conflict*, which was published in October 2010.

Both of his grandfathers served in and survived the First World War, one with the Royal Irish Rifles, the other in the Mercantile Navy, whilst his father was a member of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps during and after the Second World War.

Stephen corroborated with one of his writing partners, Ken Porter on a book published in 2012, *German PoW Camp 266 – Langdon Hills*. It spent six weeks as the number one best-selling book in Waterstones, Basildon, in 2013. They later collaborated on four books in the Towns & Cities in the Great War series by Pen and Sword, for which Stephen has written other titles independently. In 2017 *The Surrender of Singapore – Three Years of Hell 1942-45* was published. This was followed in March 2018 by *Against All Odds: Walter Tull - The Black Lieutenant*. October 2018 saw the publication of *Animals in the Great War*, and in January 2019, *A History of the Royal Hospital Chelsea, 1682-2017: The Warriors Repose*. These last two books were written with his wife, Tanya.

March of the same year saw the publication of *Disaster before D-Day: Unravelling the Tragedy of Slapton Sands*. *Mystery of Missing Flight F-BELV*, which includes the personal story of the death of his uncle during the

Vietnam war, was published alongside *City of London at War, 1939–45* in March 2020, followed by *Holocaust: The Nazis' Wartime Jewish Atrocities* in April. In June 2020, *Churchill's Flawed Decisions: Errors in Office of the Greatest Britain*, was published, and this was followed by *The Rise & Fall of Imperial Japan*, and *Countering Hitler's Spies: British Military Intelligence, 1940–1945*.

Stephen has co-written three crime thrillers which were published between 2010 and 2012 featuring a fictional Detective protagonist named Terry Danvers.

When he is not writing, Stephen enjoys the simplicity of going out for a morning coffee with his wife, Tanya, and walking their four German Shepherd dogs early whilst most sensible people are still fast asleep in their beds.

Rommel's and his men preparing for the Battle of Caporetto which took place in Italy between October and November 1917.

Rommel and his staff on a four day inspection tour of the Atlantic Wall's coastal defences on 19 February 1944. (Bundesarchiv)

Rommel's headquarters in Normandy. The Chateaux la Roche-Guyon.

Rommel and other senior German officers inspecting 'Fortress Europe' in December 1943.

Rommel in North Africa in 1942, wearing the scarf knitted for him by his daughter Gertrud.

Pervitin, a drug allegedly used by Rommel, and German soldiers in general. It performed as a mild stimulant.

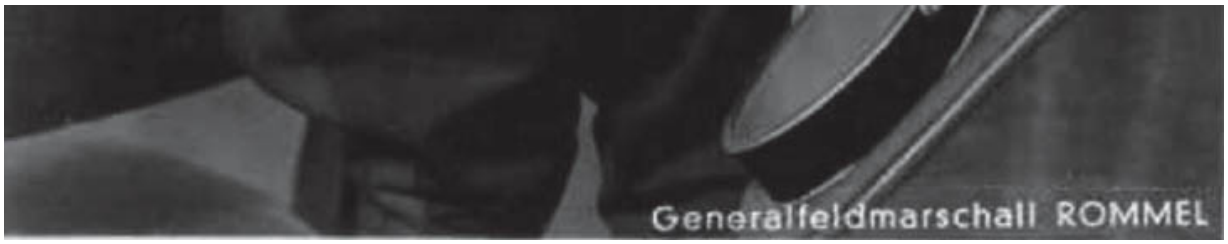
Rommel with his son Manfred and his wife, Lucie.

Rommel wearing the plaid scarf knitted for him by his daughter Gertrud.

Rommel, his wife Lucie and his daughter, Gertrud.

British Commando's during their preparation for the raid on Rommel's HQ in North Africa.

Rommel's wrecked staff car after it had been attacked by Allied aircraft in July 1944.



Rommel with his Field Marshal's Baton.

Rommel as an officer in the First World War.

Hitler and Rommel meeting in Berlin.

Rommel in desert uniform 1942.

Rommel inspecting German troops before D-Day 1944.

Rommel laying in his coffin before his state funeral.

Rommel standing alongside British and French prisoners of war.

Rommel visiting the Atlantic Wall defences.

A portrait photograph of Erwin Rommel.

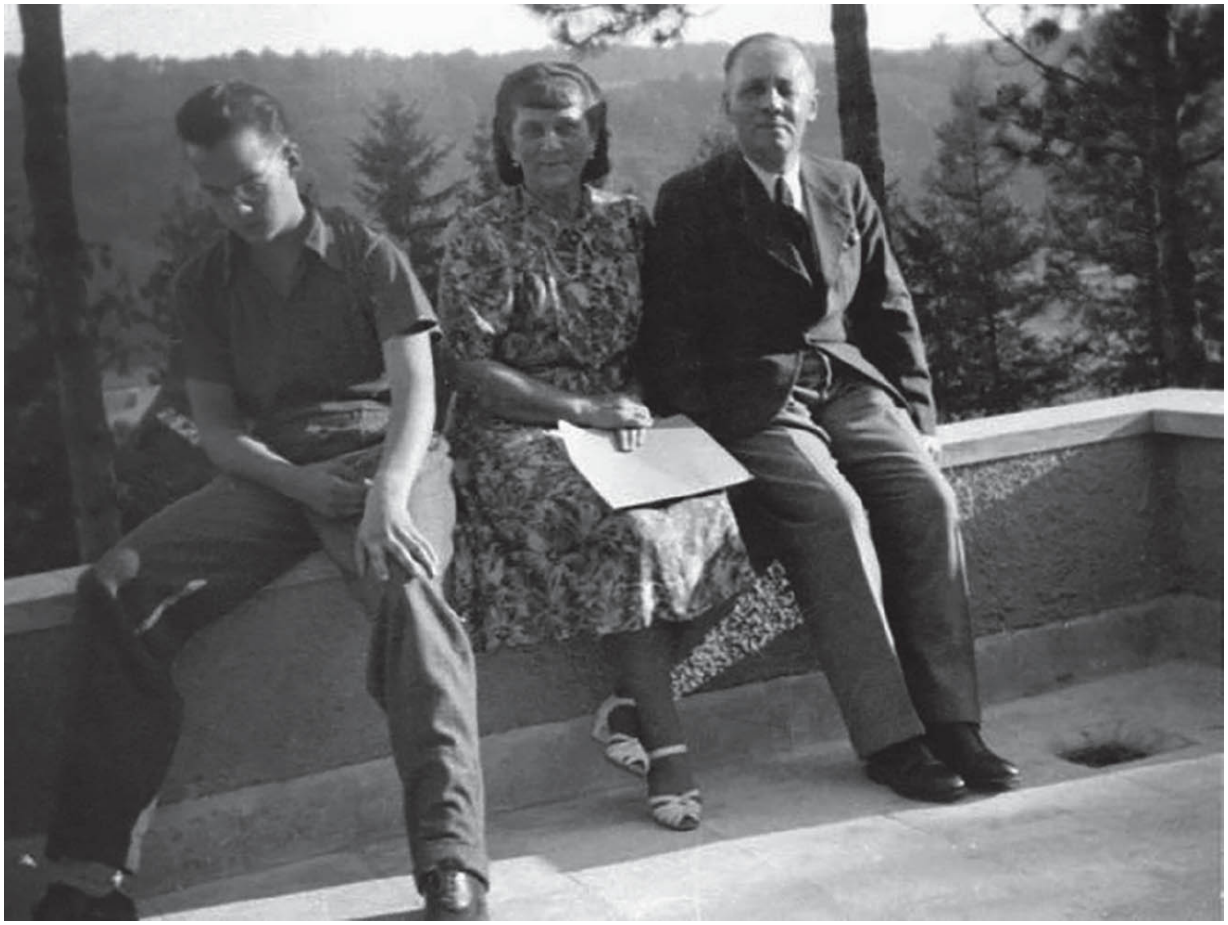
Rommel paddling a dinghy.

A smiling and happy Rommel.

Rommel a Paris victory parade in June 1940. Rare image of him wearing a steel helmet.

Rommel with his wife Lucie at their home.

Rommel meets Hitler with an image of Mussolini in the background.



Family photo with an uninterested looking Manfred and a rare image of Rommel out of uniform.

Rommel helping to move a stranded vehicle.

Rommel's funeral. His coffin being carried on the back of a gun carriage.

Rommel's state funeral.

Rommel posing for a photograph in full military uniform.

A floral tribute brought out of the church immediately before Rommel's coffin.